

AVANT

GUARDIAN

A THEATER FOUNDATION DIRECTOR'S 25 YEARS OFF BROADWAY

SECOND EDITION

DONN RUSSELL

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Work in Progress: April 1990

Chapter Two

ACT 1, SCENE 1: APRIL 1965

Chapter Three

A Place In The Sun

1965-1966

Chapter Four

**How Do You Dress For A Grant?
January 1967**

Chapter Five

**Short Takes
1966-1973**

Chapter Six

Earth Mama

Chapter Seven

In C.I.R.C.L.E.S (And Out): 1970

Chapter Eight

East Side, West Side (1970-1975)

Chapter Nine

Galactic Musings

Chapter Ten

**Real Surreal
1970-1990**

Chapter Eleven

Show and Tell

Live experimental theater in New York (or anywhere) has a history but no past. It is the nature of the business that new pieces are developed, then performed for a few weeks before relatively small audiences—and that's the end of them.

Newspapers print critical comments; journals publish scripts, and detect trends and label them; video cameras record movement and sound. But that's documenting drama, not experiencing it, which, in most instances, lasts only an hour or two at a time. Afterwards, memories are all that are carried in the hearts and minds of those who were there, and no two memories are the same.

So the history is of the artists responsible for giving us those elusive magical moments. It is those richly blessed lives that are celebrated here, along with the city that attracted them to it: a place that, as anyone who has walked its streets for a quarter century knows, is the greatest theatrical experience of them all.

Chapter One

Work in Progress: April 1990

On Friday the 13th I celebrated 25 years as director of a small charitable foundation with an evening at the theater. If that implies a festive occasion, it is misleading; aside from the lucky date (I was born on the 13th) and the milestone factor, there was nothing special about the event. No guests in fancy clothes. No champagne toasts to 25 more. No supper at Sardi's. It was just business as usual, and as usual I arrived ten minutes early—alone and in jeans.

The foundation was a private one and will remain nameless here to protect its continued ability to function in relative anonymity without being swamped by requests it can't handle. As funding corporations go, however, it was a remarkable maverick: no application forms, no interviews, no address of its own, no full-time employees, and its sole purpose was to encourage and sponsor experimentation in the performing arts, mainly theater, in or near New York City. Call it avant-garde, experimental, developmental, Off or Off Off Broadway, whatever. It occurred when groups of like-minded individuals formed companies, found suitable spaces, and began playing around with ideas, with words, with movement in attempts to expand and redefine artistic experience for themselves and, ultimately and hopefully, for the rest of us. Sometimes it came about from total group involvement, with work evolving through rehearsal trial and error. More often it happened under the guiding hand of a director along with resident or participating playwrights. In any case, it demanded a fierce dedication bordering on the fanatical.

Those little companies sprouted like fungi from the most unlikely places in the city. Few appeared in what could be called "legit" theaters. Some held performances where the members lived, with crumbs carefully scooped up and slippers hidden away before show time. Some rented upper-story commercial lofts that were stripped bare and then painted all black or all white. Others renovated abandoned storefronts or converted pipe-lined cellars into high-tech playpens. Still others took up residence in church naves, city parks, libraries and former dance halls. One enterprising group made use of the eerie vaulted chambers inside one of the anchorages of the Brooklyn Bridge.

This, then, was my bailiwick: a permanent floating enclave of performing gypsies with no permanent addresses and no visible means of support. In 1965 their collective shout was, "Do your own thing!" But as they got down to practicing what they preached, it became clear that some did it a lot better than others. Talent still mattered, whatever form it took. So for the next several decades I spent four or five nights a week, in season, evaluating their work and making recommendations for foundation funding.

The theater I attended that anniversary evening was nowhere near the glittering marquees of Broadway with names emblazoned in thousands of bright lights against the sky like diamond studs. It was in a row of dingy warehouses a block from the tugboat sounds of the Hudson River: an ancient cobblestone section of Manhattan's Lower West Side that was choked with trucks and vans by day and all but deserted at sundown. In fact, the only indication of life on the unlit block was a hand-painted sandwich board spread-legged on the pavement in front of a peeling green door. It read:

TONIGHT 8 PM
CUC
ARA
CHA
THEATER

I had been there before. Cucaracha Theater began life in that spot a year or so earlier and was discovered, like so many groups, by word of mouth along the theatrical grapevine. None of the companies could afford

newspaper ads. The “grapevine” was a tradition as old as show business, but was reported to have gotten its name from a historic tavern called the Grapevine located at Sixth Avenue and West 11th Street from 1838 to 1911. This informal social club for early Village bohemians boasted a luxuriant grapevine that snaked across its facade. The club was famous for its ten-cent lunches of mutton pie and nut-brown ale served by its affable Scottish-born proprietor, Alec McClelland. It was here that actors and artists learned of upcoming prospects, telling others, “I heard it on the grapevine.”

I caught the last performance, as the warehouse was closing for the winter, not from bad reviews or lack of enthusiasm, but lack of heat. The piece I’d seen that initial evening was so full of promise it remained in my mind. I urged our board to consider awarding Cucaracha a grant in time for the next spring’s opening; it was received a week before the troupe learned it had won an “Obie,” the Off Broadway equivalent of the Tony Award on Broadway and the Oscar in Hollywood. The members were doubly ecstatic: their first grant and first award in their first year!

I had returned on April 13, 1990, to reevaluate the company in a new work written and directed by its artistic director, Richard Caliban. It was entitled RODENTS AND RADIOS, with music by John Hoge. The producing director, Janet Paparazzi, had left word that this show was not to be missed.

Inside the green door the dank, cavernous space had been neatly swept, still a faint diesel smell rose from the stained concrete floor. It was clammy and damp like a place that had never seen sunlight. Two young women and a man sat huddled together behind a makeshift table, shivering in their dead-men’s overcoats. Seeing me approach, the girl in the middle lifted the lid of the cigar box before her. Inside was a short stack of dollar bills and a roll of bright orange tickets like the kind you got for rides at Coney Island stamped ADMIT ONE. The young man lifted a notebook from his lap, laid it on the table and flipped to the page marked with this date.

“You got a reservation?” he inquired. Even upside down I could see only three names scribbled on the page.

“Well, uh, n...” I apologized as the other young lady suddenly came to life and cut me off with a wave of her hand.

“No problem. We have a few singles still available.” The others tried to hide their giggles. “That’ll be eight dollars, please.” She tore off a ticket and quickly thrust it at me, as if she feared I might change my mind. I passed her a ten, which she daintily handed to the middle girl, who threw it in the box and retrieved two crumpled ones with the deftness of a magician. Business finished, the three rearranged themselves on the folding chairs, wrapped their coats tighter and resumed the lethargic conversation I’d interrupted.

I took a photocopied playbill from a stack at the end of the table and made my way toward an ENTRANCE sign pinned to the curtain behind them, glancing back once and smiling at the trio. *Some things haven’t changed*, I thought. If directors and actors are the lifeblood and brains of a performing company, these kids are the backbone and muscle. No theater has survived without them. Willing drones, they are drawn to it for reasons even they probably don’t understand. Not necessarily talented, they have little ambition to be on the stage, or even acknowledged, yet they appear from out of nowhere and undertake the most menial and thankless backstage tasks in order to be a part of it. Few are paid. They live hand-to-mouth existences, often in clusters in cheap East Village walk-ups; they share everything, including dreams, and thrive on the rarefied air at the periphery of “show biz.” When shows are hits, they share the pride. When they bomb, they feel the same pangs of rejection as the performers. Some take temporary day jobs in the “meaningless real world” only to support their nighttime fantasy life and be ready to drop everything at a moment’s notice to tag along when their groups tour. When the box offices play dead, a few even try to help keep shows afloat with their own meager funds, considering the sacrifice worth the burden just to be able to pay homage every evening to the elusive muse.

If they stick around long enough, they are sometimes given important-sounding titles like “administrative

assistant” (ticket taker) to impress the folks back home that they are “meaningfully employed.” Some even develop flairs for the business end of the company and are elevated to desk jobs in airless little cubicles, for which they are given grander titles like “Director of Development” (fund raiser) and are paid laughable pit-tances. Others are drawn from privileged backgrounds—mostly young women fresh out of college who feel constricted and frightened by what seems to be their inevitable prospects, who break with family traditions and emerge at the theater companies’ doorsteps like divers coming up for air. They work hard and ask for little, and, being intelligent, eager, and open-minded, they are welcomed as a touch of class as well as lures for attracting well-heeled friends and potential patrons. They make excellent fund-raisers and revel in the camaraderie of eccentric spirits.

I reached the plastic drop cloth curtain that ran the width of the warehouse, enclosing the reception area like a giant shower stall. Hung up to deflect the sharp blasts of cold air from the opened door, it undulated and whispered sensuously to its own rhythms. A slit in the curtain gave way to the performance space.

There was no one on the other side to take my ticket, so I pocketed it and walked toward the center. Six tidy rows of beige metal folding chairs stood starkly at attention under hanging bare bulbs. There were already nine or ten theatergoers seated here and there, facing a series of black platforms of differing heights, connected by narrow ramps that framed a central pit where musicians, all dressed in black, warmed up. Two of them—one male, one female—were vocalizing; weird nasal and guttural sounds issued from them, punctuated by occasional bird calls that pierced the overhead gloom like lightning flashes. A thin string-haired fellow wearing tinted glasses and a black baseball cap ran silent chords along an electronic keyboard, smiling wanly and nodding to sounds only he could hear on earphones clamped to his head like Mickey Mouse ears.

I took a seat at the end of the second row and checked the house by instinct. My first estimate was wrong. There were more like fifteen bodies scattered about on the chairs; some sat together, but there was a preponderance of singles, which was typical of the performances I attended. I often wondered about that, and deduced that it’s because more than half of every Off Broadway audience is made up of actors. They can only afford or get discounts for one ticket at a time, but companies love them: they are attentive to every nuance and are the loudest laughers and the first to applaud. They also pore over the playbills as if they were holy writ, and for good reason.

Through an arrangement with Actors Equity (the acting union), most performers in experimental, not-for-profit theater receive little or no salaries. The contracts allow them to work for a designated number of performances without compensation (except travel fare) with the stipulation that, if the shows become successful and have their runs extended, they be paid wages commensurate with their roles and union scale. The details vary, but, since the non-profits are an excellent way to showcase talent, their playbill bios are as important as advertisements and are carefully crafted for maximum impact, if not factual correctness. The most effective are copied by other actors, with the result that certain catch-words and phrases become universal: if a performer doesn’t have much previous acting experience, his or her bio might include cute lines as filler, like “Profession: acting. Occupation: waiting.” Those who are most steadily employed include *everything* in their resumes, right down to walk-ons in obscure grade Z flicks; the words “featured” and “co-star” are sprinkled about lavishly, while “regional” and “touring company” indicate where they spend most of their professional time. The fact that any of them perform anywhere at all is cause for boasting. The statistics on the numbers of actors unemployed at any given time are staggering. Many of the middle-aged and older ones must be applauded for sheer tenacity.

In the Cucaracha playbill the male vocalist indicated he was “currently preparing for the role of ‘New Father’ in real life, beginning sometime in August.” Further along, the actress playing a pregnant character wrote of herself, “Yes, she really is pregnant and she’s due in July.” No connection there, I deduced. The lengthier bios included names of shows and films whose titles boggled the mind, like HOMO SAPIEN SHUFFLE; GIRL SCHOOL SCREAMERS; ONE-ACTS UPSIDE DOWN ON YOUR HEAD; NERO’S LAST FOLLY; NIGHT

BREATH; PARTLY CLOUDY BUT NOT AS COLD; ESCAPE FROM SAFE HAVEN; and LOATHSOME COUPLE (all playing at your neighborhood theaters).

I glanced at my watch. 8:18. Late as usual. It was difficult to remember one Off Off Broadway performance in all the last quarter century that began on time. More likely, curtains rose a half-hour later than advertised and I was either herded with other patrons into box-car waiting areas, ingesting second-hand cigarette smoke, or forced to sit, like now, on ass-cracking metal, rereading playbills cover to cover. My crossed leg began to twitch uncontrollably. In the background could be heard the muffled sounds of the actors in the wings, transforming themselves from hacks and waitresses into performers, behind the perilously thin folding screens that separated reality from illusion.

8:25. Ridiculous! I read the last page of the playbill again, which I now knew by heart. It spelled out the company's philosophy: "Cucaracha serves not only as a proving ground and springboard for the unique artist, but also as a haven, an artistic home base for an evolving community of theater professionals who may return year after year throughout their careers to experiment, regenerate, and grow."

8:27. Further down the page were the accolades from the 1989 *Village Voice* Obie Committee that accompanied a special grant to the company: "It's been a long time since a dingy loft, a funky stage, and a handful of lighting instruments were signs of exciting new theater. But lately an impressive series of socially pointed and imaginative plays have been going up in crisp, crafted productions at an out-of-the-way Tribeca warehouse... Combining stark visuals with a welcome attention to precise, poetic language, they are continuing the best traditions of Off Broadway." I had to agree from experience with the fact that, lately, there had been a dearth of just such companies, but lucky, overall, to have been able to witness all the early and intervening years when companies like Cucaracha abounded.

To describe RODENTS AND RADIOS as just one step beyond what is known as a work-in-progress is to characterize most of contemporary experimental plays. Work-in-progress used to mean that a company was issuing fair warning to prospective ticket buyers that a show was not yet in its final form. It was expected to have burrs around the edges and possibly no ending. In time, however, it became a catchall phrase meaning almost anything, but most often that what was being performed was not so much a play as an exercise to be taken as only that and not expected to be anything more. A far more ominous and prevalent definition was "Critics stay away. We don't want you here!" Sometimes this was a ploy used to get a show up for audience reaction, and possible word-of-mouth spreading, before critics (especially from *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice*) could determine its fate. The practice actually became so widespread that leery newspaper editors took to sending reviewers to shows whose preview periods were extended beyond the advertised dates, but not yet listed as having "opened." Needless to say, some of those critics were no longer offered complimentary tickets indiscriminately.

One of the best examples of a true old-style work-in-progress was the dance movement epic of Japanese-born Kei Takei that continued evolving for more than twenty years. Using elements of nature as her themes—rock, water, wind—she successfully added a new section each year that proved fresh, innovative and revealing, like a slowly unwound Oriental scroll.

8:35. Six new bodies suddenly appeared through the curtain slit. One of the young men waved to the bartender, who, until now, had been thoughtfully cleaning his nails atop the lamp-lit counter and whistling softly. He dug out six bottles of Bud and popped the caps. The three new fellows and their dates undid their coats and grabbed the beers. Cucaracha was one of the Off Broadway venues that allowed, even encouraged drinking during performances. But sometimes this casual, let's party attitude proved counter-productive: often as not, in mid-act a most intense or tender moment would be shattered by the smack and roll of kicked empties in the aisles.

The newcomers filed into the front row, instantly making the house look sold-out. They pierced the reflective mood most of the audience had fallen into during the long wait with their continued loud street banter

and restless bobbing and guzzling. I figured them to make concentration difficult, so I moved across the aisle and back a few rows, just as the bartender reached up and turned off his lamp and the houselights dimmed. It was 8:40, and my twitching leg was going dead. The guy with the Mickey Mouse ears turned to the singers and raised a finger to his lips. They stopped vocalizing in mid-voice and turned the pages of their scores back to the beginning. Images slowly faded to blurs, then thinned to black velvet. Silence. The magical moment in the theater when something that was, is about to be transformed into something else before our eyes, and partly by our own will. It has often been likened to the moment of the elevation of the host at the Mass—transubstantiation. They are both acts of faith. Whether it turns out good or bad, every performance shares the exhilaration of that expectant hush and excitement of a journey not yet taken.

Too often, of course, the excitement doesn't last. The first ten minutes of a show usually reveal a dud or a winner; it either builds quickly in interest or sinks into inevitable boredom—the only thing in the theater I will not tolerate. My constant advice to fledgling companies is “Intrigue me, enrage me, confound me, confront me, but never ever bore me.”

The first ten minutes of *RODENTS AND RADIOS* didn't cause any tingles or make me want to do a little inner dance, but something eerie and interesting was imminent. A spotlight caught first one, then another of the seven players arranged on the various platforms. Each spoke in isolation in a little cocoon of light. Their paths never crossed, not did their stories. Yet there was a thread, a thin chalk line connecting all of them in a shared pathos. The characters were not remarkable: the wife of a career diplomat unhappy with her lot; a foreign-accented young tennis pro about to break into the big time and desperate about her chances; a radio disc jockey, his super ego contained under a long blond wig, raising his fists at the foreboding darkness; a young wife traveling alone from one exotic locale to another in a vain search for her place in the sun; a muscular jock who might or might not be a CIA agent, finding relevance of a sort in the jungles of an Asian battle place (hence the assorted bird calls practiced earlier); a strange wild-haired little clown of a man trying to get the world to take him seriously at, of all things, a ball game; and lastly the pregnant woman of the playbill notes, searching endlessly for the right place to have her baby, and ending up roaming the rodent-infested sewers under the city, eventually bitten, and presumably devoured, by the rats.

It was a play of words with music in an almost static void. Action was minimal. Elegantly honed phrases were underscored by the singers intoning the same words at the same time they were being spoken on stage, but into microphones and amplified throughout the room. The mix of real voices and their echoing replicas gave the piece dimension. What could have degenerated into yet another artsy-fartsy avant-garde display was saved by a genuinely effective sound device.

The evening belonged to the composer/keyboardist John Hoge, however. His incidental music, again amplified, added sharp edges to the chilly night. As clear as the direction was, and as adequately performed by the cast, Richard Caliban's script was often so confusing and incomprehensible that it was easy to lose the tenuous thread. This was not a major work, but, added to his earlier output, it offered another glimpse of a mind and talent destined to be reckoned with. It wasn't boring. In the last macabre scene the disc jockey and tennis player, now dead, their nude bodies partly covered by morgue sheets, communicated with each other from separate pallets that seemed to float in a kind of limbo. This final scene got a rise out of the disgruntled front-row viewers, literally. They rose in a body and walked out, sending beer bottles at their feet careening across the front of the stage. Sarcastic mutterings, “This whole god-dam show is a fucking stiff” trailed like litter in their wake.

Off Off Broadway walk-outs are commonplace. Some playwrights and directors are actually flattered when they happen. And the patterns they follow have rituals as rigid as Navajo rain dances. First there is loud whispering, then muttering and a gathering of coats and accouterments, v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y. Angry “*Excuse me's*” are then repeated as they bump knees with seated guests in the row on the way out, leaving everyone in the area shaken. Someone further back invariably shouts “Quiet!”, and the dissenters have succeeded in what

they intended to do—disrupt the action—and stomp up the aisle triumphantly vindicated. If they couldn't get their money back, they could get revenge. There are times, of course, when walking out seems justified. New playwrights don't yet have the ability to rivet customers to their seats. Their plots wander; their characters ramble aimlessly; and often they have nothing important or interesting to say. Writing a successful script is as much a learning process as an intuitive one, and astute writers realize early on that a receptive audience is required to complete the education.

I never left a show in progress. If there were no intermissions to provide me with a graceful and invisible exit, I would stick it out in deference to the performers. Even when an hour seemed like a hundred years and I knew how many hairs were on the head in front of me, I sat. Few theatergoers were that considerate. There were times when one person's leaving in the midst of a play signaled a veritable stampede out the exit.

Then there were the tip-toers, a timid lot. They would try to slip out as quietly as possible in order to avoid being noticed. They would invariably step on a creaking board as they inched along, painfully drawing out the agony of their departures for everyone else until they were safely up the aisles and away. That species was a close cousin to the slo-mo candy/ cough drop unwrappers whose crinkle, stop, crinkle could be as mentally deranging as a Chinese water torture.

The last segment of the play, which may have made it more comprehensible, was lost on most of us as our attention was diverted by the departing bounders. By the time they reached the slit in the curtain, the stage lights went out and *RODENTS AND RADIOS* was over. After some performances there is an agonizing moment when the audience isn't sure whether or not it has truly ended, and there is a deathly silence. That silence here was followed by a smattering of applause, which was by no means customary. Usually when the audience is left in the dark (in more ways than one) it takes someone in the wings, often the director, to break the silence with vigorous clapping until it catches on. When there are few "live ones" out front, the tendency is to over-applaud as an act of solidarity and reassurance. But ten pairs of hands clapping don't fool the actors, who, when making curtain calls, compensate for the paucity by gazing up over the heads of the audiences to some distant second balcony in the sky where silent multitudes only they can see and hear are eternally cheering and tossing bouquets.

The stage spots came up again. The players stood isolated from each other, as they had during the play, on the multi-level platforms. They bowed solemnly in unison and retreated quickly down the ramps. The audience kept up the applause, but they didn't return. There seemed to be an unwritten rule on Off Broadway that no matter how enthusiastically a production was received, one curtain call was all that was granted. It had been that way for years. There were even occasions when audiences continued banging their palms together as the cast members, coated and hatted, were already leaving the premises. The actors rarely smiled or indicated joy or pride in their accomplishments. Perhaps they wanted to appear as serious artists, indicating that the work alone was the only necessary reward. Some gave the impression they would rather there were no curtain calls at all.

That attitude might have stemmed from the earliest days of experimental theater when few performers were trained actors, singers or dancers. The parts they were given were ones anyone who could walk, talk and remember simple directions could handle. In those times things were indeed so casual that even the number of parts in a play might be determined by how many bodies showed up at a given time; whole college fraternities boasted of having appeared on the New York stage for the run of an Easter vacation. Communal effort was emphasized, personal acclaim was not. So the result may have been that defensive, noncommittal outward demeanor that continued long after most performers had received professional training and were asterisked on playbills as Actors Equity members.

The curtain call for *RODENTS AND RADIOS* had to be one of the briefest in theater history. I smiled as I remembered back a week to the final curtain of a Verdi opera at Lincoln Center. The brocaded singers gobbled up the acclaim, bowing, curtsying, lips mouthing luscious thank-yous, hands clasped high overhead

in a veritable daisy chain of triumph, the works! It took the dimming of the lights and emptying of the auditorium to stem the returns through the parted gold drapes.

The performance at Cucaracha lasted just over an hour and a half from delayed beginning to abrupt ending. RODENTS AND RADIOS was, as they say, history. But most of the audience remained seated with eyes glued to where the action had been, as if the blankness held further explanations. That was another common occurrence in avant-garde theater. I used to think it was because the works were so short and often inconclusive that they hung around, waiting to get a little more for their money. Later I realized they were trying to sort out what they had just seen. That kind of theater could be difficult and concentrated, and filled with barrages of provocative ideas and images. There were times when I actually felt limp afterwards and the act of getting up from my seat took a great effort.

The plastic dividing curtain began billowing again to its own bolero. People were beginning to leave and I followed them out into the nippy air. The three young people in dead men's overcoats were gone, probably helping backstage. On a stand a pile of fluttering flyers was anchored by a brick. They announced the next company production which promised to be a "real" work-in-progress. It was called HAMLET, THE ANTI-MUSICAL, with book by Milbauer/Becker and John Reeves and music by Milbauer/ Becker. Following this, a group of four new plays would be presented under the collective title, 4 X 4, and it too was billed as "unfinished." The flyer explained: "The idea behind 4 X 4 was to jam four plays into four weeks thereby making a humane rehearsal schedule impossible and then to further burden them with tiny budgets, thus insuring a fast and furious, rough, spontaneous approach to the material and enabling us to mix it up with a whole bunch of artists new to Cucaracha to see what kinds of interesting things might develop." I planned to return.

The sidewalk was deserted except for the silhouettes up ahead of a couple who had preceded me out of the warehouse. The sandwich board was folded and stacked against the wall. Mournful dirges echoed from the river. Tumbleweeds of fog scoured the bases of street lamps and crept up the backs of my legs as I headed uptown. There was a romantic quality to the night. A grey haze hung low on the black cutouts of buildings and turned distant lights to pale lemon smudges; but high above, the dark sky was clear and bright, with here and there a dusting of starry lint. It was a perfect night to walk home to my Greenwich Village studio. The three or four blocks to Canal Street were lined both sides with similar-looking doorways and landings to what I'd just left. Some had signs beside or over their doors reading A.I.R. (Artist In Residence) to alert firemen of the possible presence of humans in the buildings in case of fire or emergencies. I knew the street was studded with artists' studios above the first floors, but that night there was no sign of life anywhere.

I passed the subway station at Canal, determined to keep on walking. That wide thoroughfare that fairly vibrated with activity all day had neither a car nor pedestrian on it. In keeping with the romantic mood, I abandoned myself to a little Fred Astaire routine across the middle of the expanse before heading up Greenwich Street, past a couple remaining Dutch-style brick and timber relics of New York's earliest building boom. I contemplated RODENTS AND RADIOS for a block or two, and then thought back over the season that, itself, was about to be history.

The most spectacular Off Off Broadway production of 1989-1990 was Lee Breuer's Mabou Mines version of Shakespeare's KING LEAR, abbreviated to LEAR. He changed the gender of each character, beginning with the title role. This he made into the old matriarch of a clan of half-witted rednecks in a moonshine monarchy reminiscent of the Old South. Set in Smyrna, Georgia, in the late 1950s, the first scenes (here called sequences) are set in Lear's backyard during a birthday barbecue. Playing Lear was the talented actress Ruth Maleczech. By sheer artistry she managed to barely keep the role from slipping into travesty. The three original daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia have become cantankerous sons, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelion. The Fool is a drag queen in a split-seamed fur coat. The gender reversal made for occasional high camp, but added surprisingly little fresh insight to the text, which was spoken as written by Shakespeare.

Breuer was said to have developed the idea after Maleczech (his real-life wife) revealed her life-long desire

to “say the words” of the main character. The actors were all miked with thin armatures jutting out from one ear and along one cheek, with mouthpieces at the ends. This made every breath palpable and the most inaudible mumble capable of shaking the rafters. It also gave an eerie mechanical tinge to the voices that fit the bizarre goings-on.

The staging was vintage Breuer—a volatile mix of genius and audacity, with a heavy dollop of Barnum showmanship. Lear and the Fool careen wildly about the set in a scaled-down convertible with the top down. In an ensuing accident, Lear is hurled up a telephone pole where, clinging for dear life, she recites one of the most famous soliloquies in the entire literature. Maleczech gave a moving performance. It couldn’t have been easy, clutching that pole fifteen feet off the ground with feet resting only on the protruding spikes. But as moving as it was, I couldn’t help smiling at the sight of her perched up there with a headset sticking out from her cheek that made her look like Lily Tomlin doing her famous Ernestine-the-telephone-operator routine (“One ring-ee ding-ee, two ring-ee ding-ees…”).



LEAR, 1990. Mabou Mines
L to R: Lola Pashalinski, Greg Mehrten, Ruth Malaczech

Maybe *this* time, I thought, as I congratulated him. In this business there are no absolutes. Mabou Mines had been keeping good company lately. This production was sponsored in part by AT&T and the Rockefeller Foundation. But I could remember when a contribution from the local deli was cause for jubilation at the Mabou Mines headquarters.

The last “sequence” alternates between Goneril’s backyard (once Lear’s) and a deserted miniature golf course. The last scene of the play is set in a trash dump on the outskirts of town. Lear squats atop a heap of rubble, weaving from side to side in anguish while clutching the dead body of her youngest son Cordelion. The role was played by the real-life son of Breuer and Maleczech whose name only they could have invented: Lute Ramblin’. Lute first appeared, at age three, with his parents at Yale in Jean-Claude van Itallie’s NAROPA in 1978, and subsequently appeared in a number of Mabou Mines productions. His program bio listed him as a member of the Junior Varsity Basketball Team at Friends Seminary High School, that he was a musician, visual artist and athlete. After witnessing his performance I opined that if he ever got the marbles out of his mouth, he probably could list himself as an actor, too.

None of Shakespeare’s script was cut for the production, so the evening was a long one. A smattering of the audience left before the second act, either from disgust or exhaustion or both. Some did the Walk-Out routine. But the majority sat it out, surprisingly attentive when considering that they were bombarded by one chaotic scene after another: from a frightening thunder storm, to a yahoo tree hanging, to a mass shoot-out, O.K. Corral style, all interspersed with frequent treks to the backhouse, upstage right, for levity. It was a wild time, bordering on the burlesque and ridiculous. But, to the credit of Lee Breuer’s ingenuity, never boring.

As expected, the production was soundly panned by the uptown critics. One even said the actors weren’t speaking English, but gibberish. However, it didn’t hurt the box office sales. The run was a sell-out. Small lines formed each night for cancellations at the capacious modern Triplex Theatre at the downtown Manhattan Community College.

I caught up with Lee in the lobby after the performance. He was sartorially splendid in snug black chinos, several layers of shirts topped with a short-sleeved vivid Hawaiian print job, a maroon knitted cap and ankle-high sneakers.

We exchanged the ritual show-biz smooch—bear hug, cheeks barely touching, lips kissing air, and he crowed, “Donn, we did it! We beat the system! Can you believe it? We beat the goddam SYSTEM!”

A PRIVATE VIEW was directed by Lee Grant, who was making her directorial debut at the Public, after a distinguished career as an actor in films and on the stage. The cast of five appeared in all three plays, with one always acting as the narrator to link them together. It was not well received by either the critics or the public. The night I attended, the house resembled a corn cob after a blight—entire empty rows between others only spottily occupied. But I enjoyed it, if only because of the memories it evoked of a sojourn I made to neighboring Hungary in the spring of 1984, where I witnessed similar situations as those described in the plays.

Despite the cool critical reception, four actors from the show were awarded Obies for performance, including the monarch herself. The cast was made up of Mabou Mines regulars: Bill Raymond (Goneril), Greg Mehrten (the Fool), Ellen McElduff (Edmund), and Terry O’Reilly (Regan). Added to the roster this time were those two buxom bookends of Off Off Broadway, Lola Pashalinski (Kent) and Black-Eyed Susan (Albany). From Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company onward, their voluptuous presences graced so many avant-garde productions they were regularly accorded star-quality applause at their entrances on stage. No strangers to Obie Awards either, they were here afforded the opportunity to display depths of character hitherto untapped.

Sadly, this would be the last Mabou Mines production with all present members of the troupe. Lee Breuer had decided to retire after this one and go on his own; JoAnne Akalaitis would soon leave to become the new artistic associate of Joseph Papp at the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater. Only a few of the original members would remain, including Ruth Maleczek, so this was a fitting and feisty final collaboration.

Greenwich Street straightens up and behaves a few blocks north of Canal where it enters a world of renovation real estate. Sooty factories and warehouses metamorphose into Cinderella condos with round-the-clock doormen. Fancy Korean fruit stands abound. Everything shouts *nouveau*. Even the street begins to widen into what will be a respectable boulevard when it reaches Greenwich Village. A jumbled heap of discarded signs in an alleyway sent out an undecipherable message. It reminded me of the most artistically rewarding play of the season, *TERMINAL HIP*, by Mac Wellman, that, in late May, at the annual Obie ceremonies, would share the award for Best Play with two other works: Craig Lucas's *PRELUDE TO A KISS* at the Circle Repertory Company and Suzan-Lori Parks' *IMPERCEPTIBLE MUTABILITIES IN THE THIRD KINGDOM* at BACA Downtown in Brooklyn.

Billed as "a spiritual history of America through the medium of bad language," *TERMINAL HIP* was no outpouring of profanity or ugly words; it was, as Wellman explained to me in a letter, "just bad English." At times the words came at you like a hail storm; at other times they engulfed you in a warm luxuriant bath. Now and then a word or phrase was recognized briefly and caused one to smile, but the major impact of the piece was made mostly by the accumulation of unrelated word pictures in your mind. None of the sentences made conventional sense. However, by the end of the work, one felt a kind of meaning that couldn't be expressed: you felt you knew what the play was about without really knowing what it was about.

It was a one-actor one-act; the character had no designated name. The performer, Stephen Mellor, dressed in a conservative dark suit and tie, rose from a chair at the edge of the audience where he had been since people arrived. He walked in a business-like way to the center of the playing area and stopped behind a desk that, along with several hanging panels at the back of the stage, constituted a set. He turned, faced the audience, and, in the manner of a chief executive officer lecturing at a convention, began an hour-long monologue of recognizable words in nonsensical context.

Played to capacity crowds, *TERMINAL HIP* began its run in January on Second Avenue and 9th Street at P.S. 122, a one-time public school turned into a performance art center in the East Village. It was cheered by critics and audiences alike. Mac Wellman had already made a name for himself with works like *CELLOPHANE* at BACA Downtown, and *BAD PENNY*, a site-specific piece for Bow Bridge in Central Park. He was becoming known for his irreverent and quirky use of language. This play became the epitome.

In the letter he wrote me in late November, Wellman told of the difficulty in mounting the production. It was produced on the proverbial frayed shoestring by Anne Hamburger/En Garde Arts with minimal sets and lighting by Kyle Chepulis, and employed only one actor. But in those inflated times the cost of even the simplest productions was prohibitive. Mac was concerned that the budget was so small the people who had worked hardest to prepare it—Annie Hamburger and the others—would not get any compensation for their efforts. We at the Foundation agreed, awarded them a grant, and the piece appeared as scheduled (if not always on time).

Much of the show's enormous success had to be attributed to the skill of the actor who recited the words: Stephen Mellor made perfect sense out of the illogical phrases, and tossed them off with the ease of someone used to speaking that way. The lighting, designed by Kyle Chepulis, was subtly keyed to the inflections of the speaker. It ran the gamut from a harsh white ceiling fixture to a soft rose glow bouncing off the back screens. Added dramatic effects were created by lighting the entire desktop from within whenever the actor leaned across it to emphasize a point. At other times, he would rest his hands on the desk and look into its depths, reminding one of a fortune teller seeking knowledge in a crystal ball.

The playwright had wisely honed the work to the right length. The audience couldn't have tolerated the nonsense any longer. As it was, they were receptive and found much of it amusing. The cramped, hot-house atmosphere of P.S. 122's street-floor theater helped; because we were jammed together tightly on steeply banked bleachers on two sides of the performing area in an L-shape, the reactions of neighbors were immediate and contagious. There were no obvious walk-outs, and, as the crowd exited afterwards, you could tell by the smiles on their faces that they had experienced something truly extraordinary.

Other plays added luster to the 1989-1990 Off Off Broadway season. The first that came to mind as I turned and walked east toward Hudson was EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE, John Jesurun's latest shouting match that kept audiences baffled at the Kitchen on the far western end of 19th Street. Jesurun, once a sculptor, devised strong visual settings for his work. This one was a prime example. A long wall divided the performance space in two. Half the audience was seated on one side, half on the other, but they were visually cut off from each other by the height of the wall. Action took place on both sides simultaneously, with strategically placed video monitors above the wall so the actors and audience could interact with those on the other side.

Both sides of the wall—one white, the other grey—had identical square tables attached at center stage, and a small desk and chair built into each right-hand corner. Midway through the performance, two actors, one at each end of the wall, pushed it around clockwise until it turned 180 degrees, on what turned out to be a central axis. It gave each side of the audience a brief glimpse of the other, in a startling mirror effect, before the wall was again pushed until it was across the front of each group, cutting us off once more. This time, however, the players, whom we had seen previously only on the monitors because they were on the other side, were now live before us. It was the first indication that the wall wasn't a stationary prop, and the effect was so stunning, it made us gasp.

At the climax of the piece, the wall was spun full around, faster and faster, creating a circular breeze, like a propeller. The airplane analogy was apt, for the action might or might not have been taking place in the cabin of a troubled aircraft. The male actors may or may not have been clergymen on their way to a religious convention, since their costumes consisted of collars that were a cross between clerical and space-age.

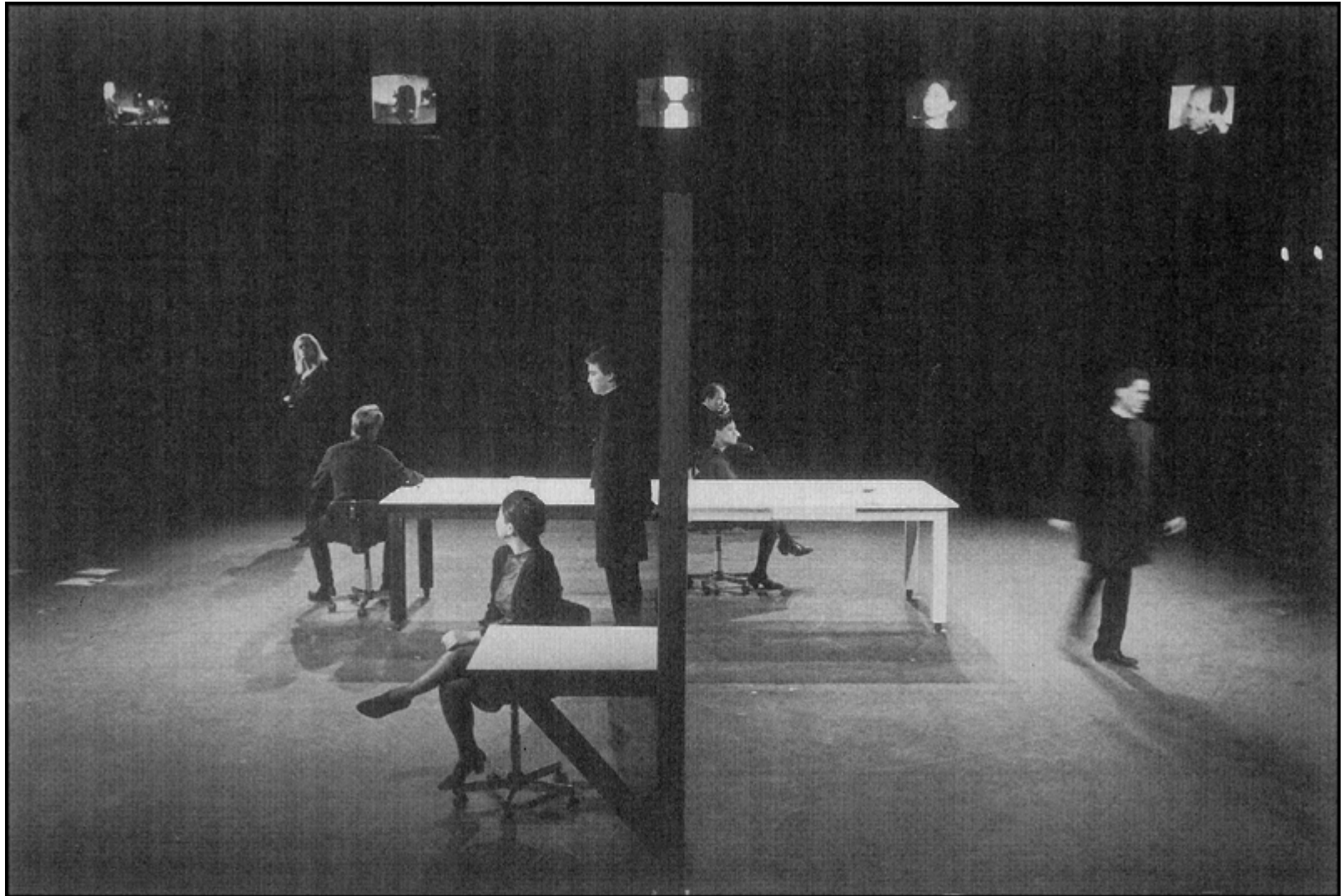
As in all Jesurun works, movement was minimal. The words and plot were purposely ambiguous. The players shouted their lines in a stilted, confrontational monotone. No one ever smiled. There was no logical coherence to the plot. Alienation reigned. Jesurun was a genius at mixing media, especially video and live action. He could make a holistic experience, born of intricate technicalities, seem effortless.

THREE POETS, written by Romulus Linney, was performed at the Theater for the New City on First Avenue and Tenth Street. It was an affecting tribute to three women in history: Komachi, in ninth century Japan; Hrosvitha, in tenth century Saxony; and Akhmatova, in Moscow in 1952. The work was of simple structure and quiet dignity, performed in three scenes without intermission. The acting was strong, with actors doubling in different roles. From a thwarted oriental love affair to a European religious awakening to a mother's silent outrage as she defiantly takes up a position each morning, every year, before a prison where her son is wrongly incarcerated, Limey weaves fragile and haunting tales from the poetry of the three women.

In contrast, Otrabanda came up with JUICE at the La MaMa E.T.C. Annex. Roger Babb wrote a slapstick pastiche of the veggie health food craze that was funny and vulgar, verging on gross. The production, directed by Babb, was hindered by an inappropriately busy set made up of hand-fitted, interlocking wooden slats designed by Jun Maeda. It resembled a stylized whale anatomy and worked at cross-purposes to the play. Since movement was very much a part of the Otrabanda style, the heavy traffic over the slats looked awkward and treacherous. Nonetheless, it was fun. There were hilarious, broad performances by Talking Band veterans Tina Shepard, as a shrewd, overly padded proprietor of a health food store, and Paul Zimet as an old geezer with a shopping list of intestinal ailments that he gleefully enumerated at the drop of a suppository. The final ascent of the company through a slatted water wheel and up into the clouds was pure mock-heroic,

Wagnerian kitsch.

Just as Otrabanda was ending its run at La MaMa on East 4th Street, another group called Watchface was previewing a new piece entitled *WHITE* at the Dance Theater Workshop, across and up town on West 19th



EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE, 1990. By John Jesurun.

Street.

WHITE was a scary look at the intimate lives of a clan of white supremacists, seen from the inside. As the play opens, the group's leader, Josiah White, is seen at their headquarters with his three wives, his brother Zachariah and his wife, and other kinfolk. They are all huddled about the communal table, plotting their next bombing expedition. As they vehemently argue the details, glimpses of their lives together surface and bubble with jealousy and resentment. Josiah's authority is challenged by his cousins. He suppresses their anger with threats of God's wrath. But the undercurrent of hostility runs raggedly through the play. The bombing, ostensibly of a Federal government office where records are kept, backfires. Word is sent to Josiah, who has remained at their headquarters with the women and children, that all the participating cousins and his brother have been killed in the blast. Fearing discovery and prosecution, he gathers the remainder of the band together. They leave everything behind and set out toward the western horizon and freedom.

Written by two Watchface members, Iris Rose and Kim Knowlton, it presents these strange distorted creatures, not as freaks, but as human beings who, despite their misguided zealotry, live and cope with the same uncertainties and fears as the rest of us. A glossary of terms used in the play was printed in the playbills. It described the parameters of their existence: Albicide—whites fighting against whites; Identity—religion based on Christian traditions (its teachings focus on establishing a white race as God's chosen people fit to rule the earth); Northwest imperative—the belief that God has set aside five states of the northwest United States as the white race's exclusive homeland; Posse Comitatus—Latin for "power of the country." Members of this secret order believe, as a matter of religious faith, that no citizen is bound to obey any authority higher than a county

sheriff. They refuse to pay taxes on principle, hold no bank accounts, and systematically remove their names from government files, by any means, in order to avoid being tracked down by the “illegal” Federal government.

Some of the acting was amateurish and stilted. The overall impact of this unusual theme, however, sent us out into the streets feeling a numbing cold chill that was only partly due to the February night air.

Continuing in this macabre vein, I recalled the Primary Stages production of *BOWER BOYS* by Willy Holtzman. Unlike *WHITE*, this was a highly polished staging. Presented in creepy, frightening immediacy by a company of skilled young actors, it tells of an idealistic American college student who accepts employment as a counselor at a youth center in the wilds of Northeast Dundee, Scotland. He is confronted by a deadly gang of skinheads—the Bower Boys—who hang out there. The term is the rough equivalent of “rumble” in American gang jargon, and, in the course of the play, they terrorize and beat him up, break his will and finally cause his disenchantment and departure. A subplot involves a “bower” they are planning on a neighborhood gang’s turf because of the supposed rape of the leader’s girlfriend by a member of the other gang. The real rapist, however, is found to be their own second in command who has long harbored a seething jealous resentment of his leader “friend.” The resulting tragedy doubly underscores the hopeless, empty existence of poor youth anywhere. The shaved heads, the stomping boots, the simulated Scottish brogue, everything about the production rang terrifyingly true, and left many in the audience with sweaty palms.

Whenever the young actress Mary Shultz was included in the cast, a play was invariably exceptional. She won an Obie in 1990 for sustained excellence in performance and brought an intelligence and sense of subtle comic timing to every role she undertook. She was remarkably striking physically also, in an almost glamorous way: in profile her large liquid eyes, abbreviated Dick Tracy nose and tight crinkly blond hair resembled an early Dietrich studio photo viewed at an angle.

That year she appeared in two notable productions. The first was Jeffrey M. Jones’s *THE CRAZY PLAYS* at BACA Downtown, Brooklyn. BACA was an oasis for the arts in a desert of rundown, unoccupied tenements and rubbish-lined empty lots near the Brooklyn Bridge. The heavily locked steel door to the street had to be buzzed to be opened, which spoke volumes about that wild end of Willoughby Street. A late-night return from there, down a series of unlit alleys to the nearest subway stop, was enough to make your heart inch up closer to your throat by the moment. Yet, once inside the theater/art gallery complex, the atmosphere was warm and friendly. The comfortable upstairs performing space was perfect for intimate plays and solo performances. But for late curtain raisers, this place took the cake: the house manager always waited until the last possible straggler had arrived and been inched into the front row before allowing shows to start.

Jeff Jones called plays like this one “collages,” meaning that for several months he would write down situations and characters at random as they occurred to him. Then he’d whittle it all down to about a hundred pages of raw material, from which he formed the playlets. All had different structural rules, but they all related because of their derivation from common sources.

Like his friend and colleague Mac Wellman, he was able to somehow wrench a crazy logic from the random nonsense verbiage that gave the audience instant gratification, if not long-term comprehension. The titles indicated the tongue-in-cheek tone that suffused the entire productions: *WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD*; *HOW A COWBOY SAYS GOODBYE*; *DIABOLICAL TALES FROM BAYONNE*; *MOM’S SUBMARINE WORLD AND HOUSE OF STRANGENESS*; *HOW NOT TO GET LAID*; and *NOBODY KNOWS THE (UN-HUNH) TROUBLE I’VE SEEN*. The set by Kyle Chapulis augmented it, with a living room and picture window forced into distorted cubistic perspective and vibrating with primary color. The actors also helped by performing multiple roles in broad, comical style, adding to the bewilderment by sometimes playing fathers, then sons, then daughters and wives in outrageous domestic vignettes. Mary Shultz and Liz Schofield were isolated in the background, grinding out burlesque turns and Radio City Music Hall Rockette routines in tall, sequined hats and canes, oblivious to the commotion before them, but creating a baffling

counterpoint that divided the audience's attention.

The other play that Mary Shultz starred in during the 1989-1990 season ran in the fall and again, by popular demand, in May, at The HOME for Contemporary Theatre and Art in the Tribeca section of lower Manhattan. Entitled 2 SAMUEL 11, ETC., it was by David Greenspan and was the latest of his works to be performed at HOME since he became resident playwright in 1986. He acted and directed in the earlier plays, but in this one he gave the two roles to Shultz and Ron Bagden. The simple staging included only a large sofa



BOWER BOYS, 1990. Primary Stages

downstage center and a writing table and chair behind it at stage right. Both were illuminated by separate but equal pools of light.

Act 1 opens with Character 1 (Bagden) writing at the desk in his workroom. His back is to the audience. At first it seems he is writing a letter to a male lover, but then it becomes more of an agonized memoir. As he writes, the words expressing his sexual yearnings are spoken by Character 2 (Shultz), reclining on the sofa, between drags on a long cigarette. They become more explicit and graphic; her tone becomes more sensual. Every sentence contains the “F” word. Then, without warning, she becomes the young beautiful Bathsheba, telling of how the old King David spied her while walking on the roof of his palace late one afternoon, as put forth in the second book of Samuel, Verse 11 onward of the Old Testament, which continues, “...so David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her...”

She is already married to Uriah, but no problem. David sends him off to fight a battle he can't win and is killed. "When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah, her husband, was dead, she made lamentations for her husband. And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son."

The same four-letter words spoken earlier are heard again, but now in the context of a young, voluptuous woman who is forced to make love to an old monarch who has hair all over his back and lust in his jaundiced eyes. Character 2 alternates back and forth between the two personas while coolly smoking and stretching further back on the sofa as the light fades. Character 1 continues writing silently, pauses once to reflect, then continues to write again as the act ends.

Act 2 takes place in the shower stall of Character 1's bathroom. Standing naked within a barely concealing ring of phony soap bubbles, he launches into a monologue that begins with reminiscences of the lover told about in Act 1. Then he becomes that lover, much as Character 2 became Bathsheba in Act 1, and has a conversation with someone else, becoming that someone else. He thinks about his wife and becomes her as well, talking to a girlfriend over lunch; then becomes the girlfriend who tells about her husband screwing around with the original (Act 1) lover's other boyfriend, and then becomes him, etc., etc. In the course of a half hour, he acts out in psychic androgyny a passel of characters—old, young, male, female—effectively imitating their inflections and gestures, all the while nonchalantly soaping his armpits in the shower.

The two acts were a tour-de-force for the actors. And if the transition from Bathsheba to bath water proved too bewildering for most of the audience, they still caught the sparks of talent that bounced off the performances, and returned them in fireworks of applause.

Obscenity is tricky to handle on stage, on or off Broadway. The isolation of the surroundings, the stillness and concentration of so many onlookers, all magnify the shock value of the words beyond their normal impact. When not handled carefully, it can seem forced or phony. Even worse, it can become a thing of itself apart from the play, causing viewers to squirm in discomfort. Actors have difficulty dealing with it. Many would rather not have to try. In the 1969 musical *COCO*, about the life of Parisian dress designer Gabrielle Chanel, Katharine Hepburn, in the title role, was required to use the expletive "shit!" in a moment of frustration. She balked at every performance and, it was said, had to black out mentally just before the scene so she couldn't hear herself say it. Mary Shultz made the four-letter tour of her orifices believably matter-of-fact, even droll. But some people would have found it offensive.

This led me to ponder the recent frustrating turn of events concerning cultural censorship in the United States, especially in the current funding policies on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). This program of Federal subsidy is as old as our Foundation. It was set up in June 1965, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the first bill that allowed Congress to establish the two-headed National Foundation of the Arts and Humanities—the Arts to be administrated by the National Council of the Arts.

It came due for reauthorization in the spring of 1990. The trouble started when Senator Jesse Helms (Republican, South Carolina) and a well-organized campaign led by the American Family Association and other right wing religious groups tried with every means possible to abolish the NEA. Their complaints centered on exhibits by two photographers: Robert Mapplethorpe, an avowed homosexual, recently dead of AIDS, whose retrospective at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art included portraits of nude children, gay men in sexual embrace, and close-ups of male genitalia; and Andres Serrano, at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, whose "Piss Christ," a photo of a cheap cast-metal crucifix immersed in the artist's own urine, caused a sensation one year earlier. Both exhibits received Endowment funds. Both were condemned by the right for flaunting pornography and obscenity in public and insulting the religious beliefs of a large segment of taxpaying population whose money subsidized them.

In the appropriations bill enacted in 1990, Senator Helms insisted that certain restrictive sentences be attached. For example, grant recipients "may not use the money for works that may be considered obscene,"



2 SAMUEL II, ETC. 1990. By David Greenspan.
HOME for Contemporary Theatre and Art. Shown: Mary Schultz.

including “depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts, and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific merit.”

Cries of censorship went up immediately. Theater people were in the forefront of the protests that sprang up around the country. Jessica Tandy, the beloved octogenarian actress who had recently won an Oscar for Best Actress in the film “*Driving Miss Daisy*”, led a large group of luminaries to testify before the House Appropriations Interior Sub-Committee in Washington, D.C. She read an excerpt from the screenplay by Joseph Mankiewicz for another Academy Award winner, “*All About Eve*” (1950). In it, Gary Merrill tells a young aspiring actress, Anne Baxter, that the theater is not just a bunch of buildings around Times Square, but anywhere that people find magic and make-believe, from carnivals to flea circuses, ballets to one-man bands, or Disney to Ibsen. It may not all be to your liking, he adds, but it means something to somebody somewhere, so don’t discriminate.

The same day in New York, the theater community held a rally in Union Square that included Christopher Reeve, poet Allen Ginsberg, and director of Lincoln Center Theater, Gregory Mosher. A silent row of noted writers stood, bound and gagged, in protest. Everyone was urged to write letters to their congressmen to counter the incredible flood of right wing mail already tipping the scales in Washington.

Joseph Papp, Director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, refused a fifty thousand dollar NEA grant for his Festival Latino, vowing to refuse any further NEA grants so long as the restrictive language was in place. His example was quickly followed by the University of Iowa Press, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival at Ash-

land, *The Gettysburg Review* in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and the *Paris Review* in New York. The Theater for the New City, also in New York, was the first of the Off Off Broadway theaters to decline a grant.

Later the NEA, declaring the original language too vague, tried to clarify it by accepting already existing definitions of obscenity such as that established by the U. S. Supreme Court in *Miller vs. California*. It then read, “The Endowment considers to be obscene only work which, 1. When taken as a whole, the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find appeals to prurient interest; 2. Depicts or describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive way; 3. Taken as a whole lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”

The new guidelines made it expressly clear that if one did receive a NEA grant, one must obey the rules laid down by the Endowment—“Grant recipients, in order to receive funds, must agree that they will not use those grant funds to promote, disseminate or produce materials that are ‘obscene’ under the *Miller vs. California* ruling.”

To make sure that a recipient didn’t just take the money for a proposed project that falls safely within the rules and then apply it to another project that didn’t, the NEA claimed that when it found out, it would “write a letter to the grantee notifying it that it may be in violation of Section 304 and that a written justification of the project and its compliance with Section 304...be submitted within 30 days... If the Endowment finds that such a violation has occurred, the Endowment will recoup the grant money pursuant to its civil and administrative remedial power.”

And then there was the other side of the argument that claimed that the government is NOT censoring the arts. You still have the right to do whatever you wish artistically. But taxpayer’s money should not have to be spent on your work if it doesn’t comply with the NEA regulations. You should get private funding for that. That argument, however, fails to take into consideration the fact that places where this art is shown, such as galleries and theaters, cannot exist without subsidy. So, of course, those places will have to think twice before presenting work that doesn’t comply. A good example was the 1990 brouhaha caused when the city of Cincinnati arrested the director of a local gallery for presenting a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit. Officials attended the packed opening reception and made their arrests immediately. The case would have to go to court, but already the two camps had formed—one that agreed with the NEA rulings and the other that called them illegally restrictive.

Television coverage of the event showed masses of people marching behind placards that read “SIN-cinnati NO MORE!” and shouting obscenities far more offensive than those the work was being condemned for.

How it would all be resolved was anybody’s guess at the moment. But it was ironic, and somehow typically American, that a program that was begun with such enthusiasm and expectancy twenty-five years before to encourage the arts of the country, and in the process made it possible for new symphony orchestras to be formed in places where they never would have been heard before, and ballet companies to perform in the smallest communities, and local craft projects to be regenerated, and galleries to be opened to make art available to everyone—to say nothing of reviving regional small theater—should be turned into a watchdog organization for a bunch of hide-bound fundamentalists who would squeeze the world into their stiff moral straitjackets.

By now I’d turned north on Hudson Street and was halfway home. The names of the side streets nearby still evoked the early days when this area was the center of the city: Spring, Vandam, Charlton, King, Houston. But little by little, the eight-over-eight ripple-glass panes of the windows had given way to twenty-foot squares of plate glass. Huge new curve-cornered office buildings with set-back upper stories formed giant staircases to the sky. Lit up at night, they were like film negatives: bright white interiors enclosed in skeletal black gridwork. Entrances opened into acre-wide indoor foyers wrapped in veined marble. Visored security guards in brown and maroon pontificated behind stainless steel counters in the distance beyond Frank Stella constructions that beckoned like gaudy Venus flytraps. In the quiet evening, everything about them seemed

to have been readied and waiting in hushed anticipation for the appearance next morning of some legendary Pharaoh of Finance, or, at the very least, a 1930s movie mogul to use them as sets for filming German existential extravaganzas. There was no one around to share the spectacle with. The street was empty of pedestrians and vehicles. It seemed downright wasteful, I thought, burning so much wattage just to show off all of that opulence to a single pair of unimpressed eyes.

I was startled back to the present by sounds of laughter ahead on Hudson that broke the stillness like buckshot blasts. In the fog I made out forms emerging from another brightly lit building on the corner with banners strung out to the streetlight and back. It was the grand opening of a new Greek restaurant that was about as removed from the Aegean as it could get. All chrome and Formica, with an escalator lined with etched glass panels and spotlit tables in pale grey ambiance. A tastefully dressed crowd that was fun to ogle was assembling on the sidewalk awaiting limousines. But it was their polyglot foreign conversations that gave me pause, and for some reason brought to mind the most incredible theatrical event of the year: the fall of the Berlin Wall and with it the end of Communism in Eastern Europe. It was only eight months since it happened, and the world was still numb with disbelief (and relief). Every day a new scene unfolded as one country after another overthrew their governments, leaving even the experts baffled. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had done for the satellite nations what he had trouble doing for his own—fired imaginations for change with his rhetoric. If anyone had predicted a year (or even months) earlier that they would soon be selling pieces of the Wall as souvenirs under the Brandenburg Gate, or that a dissident playwright who had previously been jailed repeatedly for his views would overnight become the president of his country, people would have thought it impossible, crazy.

But that was just what happened. East and West Germans freely communicated with each other for the first time in forty-five years. Václav Havel, that playwright who became the voice of the “velvet underground” that brought the fall of the regime in Czechoslovakia, had now become its leader. What was most amazing was that it was all done with a minimum of bloodshed. Only in Romania did the old Communist guard gun down their countrymen in a last futile attempt to retain power. Elsewhere it was a war of words and changing ideologies. There were even welcome lighter moments in the spellbinder that could only be described as a work-in-progress. For example, the newly elected prime minister of East Germany, Lothar de Maizière, when asked on arrival in Washington to present his credentials to President George Bush if this was his very first trip to America, replied that it was and added, incredulously, “Everywhere I go it’s for the first time! I was only an ordinary orchestra musician before the Berlin Wall collapsed, and I have never been out of my country”.

Václav Havel was certainly no stranger to avant-garde New York. He was already a triple-time Obie winner for his plays, some of them appearing while he was imprisoned. When he and his wife came to the city on an official trip soon after his election, they surreptitiously sneaked out of their Waldorf Astoria suite late one night and, disguised in their old leather jackets and jeans, visited favorite haunts in the East Village they used to frequent, like McSorley’s, rekindling friendships and reliving memories. (They got away with it for several hours before Czech and U.S. Secret Service guards caught up with them and persuaded them to return to their penthouse pad.) At the start of the 1990 Obie Award ceremonies, a telex was received which read, “I have been awarded the Obie prize three times for my plays. In all cases it meant encouragement for my further work. Despite the fact that toward the end of last year I became president of our republic, I still remain a member of your artistic community. I feel an artistic and spiritual affinity with all who are undertaking the difficult but at the same time beautiful and extremely important task of the creative process. (Signed) Václav Havel.”

The first of Havel’s plays to be done at the Public Theater was MEMORANDUM in the 1967-1968 season. It was a broad farce based on a mechanized society that developed an artificial language for business transactions that no one was able to understand. In 1969-1970, the Forum Theater presented his THE INCREASED

DIFFICULTY OF CONCENTRATION, also a comedy, about a scientist trying to cope with the modern world. The Public Theater again, in 1983-1984, offered a group of one-acters by Havel under the overall title, A PRIVATE VIEW. They were harsh exposés of the injustices and failings of an authoritarian society.

Semi-autobiographical in nature, the first two plays on the program—INTERVIEW and PRIVATE VIEW—were written in 1975 while Havel worked in a brewery in the USSR; the third, PROTEST, set in Prague like the others, was written in 1978, soon after his imprisonment for human rights activities. Productions of his plays were banned in Czechoslovakia at the time, so these plays were originally performed secretly in his friends' apartments. The characters were real people, known to his associates. Fellow writers and actors were mentioned by their real names in the scripts. Only a few of the principle antagonists had their names and occupations changed to protect them from the authorities.

A PRIVATE VIEW was directed by Lee Grant, who was making her directorial debut in the Public, after a distinguished career as an actor in films and on the stage. The cast of five appeared in all three plays, with one always acting as the narrator to link them together. It was not well received by either the critics or the public. The night I attended, the house resembled a corn cob after a blight—entire empty rows between others only spottily occupied. But I enjoyed it, if only because of the memories it evoked of a sojourn I made to neighboring Hungary in the spring of 1984, where I witnessed similar situations as those described in the plays.

The spanking new office buildings along Hudson Street stopped abruptly at one of the loveliest thoroughfares in Greenwich Village, and one of only a handful of New York streets with two official names: St. Luke's Place and Leroy Street, both shown on the same sign. It successfully resisted a century or more of neighborhood change to remain as it was originally—gracious brownstones along the north side with high stoops and balustrades intertwined with wisteria vines, shaded by broad ginkgo and iolanthus trees; on the south side was a community park with playgrounds, handball courts, and a baseball diamond.

I turned into it and walked toward Seventh Avenue, impressed as always by the subtle glow of old carriage lamps and the nostalgic air that contrasted so sharply with the relentless blue neon of modern life I'd just passed. Seventh Avenue led directly to Sheridan Square, the heart and soul of the Village, and I was nearly home. Traffic began to pick up and more pedestrians filled the sidewalks. Even in the worst weather, the square was cross-hatched with constant activity at all hours. Everyone who visited the Village eventually ended up there. The potent mix of tourists, students, street vendors, and local habitués seated at sidewalk cafés made it, for many, a close cousin to the Latin Quarter of Paris.

West 4th and Christopher Streets collide at Seventh Avenue in a scant right angle to form the western and southern boundaries of the tiny triangular park. Grove Street sneaks away from Christopher to meet 4th on its own terms and frame the eastern border. It then scoots across Seventh and heads southwest. From the park, these streets branch out in all directions like wheel spokes, pointing the way to myriad shops, health food stores, book stalls, restaurants, fortune teller parlors, and quaint townhouses that have harbored generations of writers, artists, and performers and made the area famous. Also they led to the numerous Off Broadway theaters that once proliferated there, some still in existence and going strong.

That night, however, the little theaters on the square's periphery had already disgorged their last patrons and closed tight, among them the Cherry Lane, Theatre de Lys (renamed the Lucille Lortel), Actors Playhouse, Circle Rep, the Grove Street and Ridiculous Theatrical Companies, all part of a movement that had its beginnings, some said, at a theater that once graced the square but had long since moved uptown. The Circle-In-The-Square once looked out toward the park from the far side of West 4th Street and was where the first production of a play opened on April 24, 1952, that became so successful it presaged the advent of original theater downtown—SUMMER AND SMOKE, by Tennessee Williams, starring Geraldine Page.

I strode the Christopher Street length of the park where buds were just starting to peek out from the foliage, tended by a stern General Sheridan who, from his pedestal, had stood guard through all kinds of weather

and situations and, as the story went, had turned green with envy at what he witnessed on the benches on hot summer nights. Four determined young men were folding up a card table and some chairs. They took down from the wrought iron fence posters that pleaded for donations for AIDS research. Someone had been on duty there ever since the day in 1982 when the dreaded virus was diagnosed and given its name. In the gutter before them was a painted white line drawing of a fallen man with arms stretched out in agony like police tracings of dead bodies. Across his chest was scrawled, "Another victim of AIDS. HELP?"

No one had yet ever recovered from it. In the decades leading up to 1990, it had decimated the ranks of the theater community. During the 1989-1990 season alone, hardly a two-week period passed without a memorial service being announced for yet another talented young man brought down in his prime. Everybody in the business by then had lost at least one good friend to it. Right there in Sheridan Square, the Ridiculous Theatrical's leader Charles Ludlam had succumbed to it the year before, and a small lane in front of the basement theater he founded had been renamed in his honor Charles Ludlam Place. At a performance of HAMLET in London in November 1989 by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Royal Festival Hall, I was disappointed to learn the star of the production, Ian Charleson (best known in America for his portrayal of the Scottish divinity student who won the Olympics for running in the award-winning film "Chariots of Fire") was listed as "indisposed." Later that night on the telly news, the reporter said Charleson was on his way to Australia to begin rehearsals for the traveling production. But then the following March the word was out—he'd died of AIDS at home.

The pervasiveness and horror of the situation cast a paralyzing numbness on the community that made coping with it in any creative way almost impossible. But a few early plays had been presented that tried to capture the devastation to the victims and their loved ones, such as THE NORMAL HEART by Larry Kramer at the Public Theater, and AS IS by William M. Hoffman at the Circle Repertory, both in the 1984-1985 season. No one had tried to deal with the effects of AIDS with any degree of levity until an enterprising couple, Bill Russell and Janet Hood, attempted it—in a musical! He wrote the book, she composed the music in a revue format that said everything there was to say in gentle, funny, harsh, angry, and ultimately heart-breaking vignettes under the title ELEGIES FOR ANGELS, PUNKS, AND RAGING QUEENS.

Performed in the odd expanse of the RAPP Art Center's main stage on 4th Street and Avenue A in the East Village, the cast appeared en *masse* first at the audience level, where it performed monologues, duets, trios, and group pieces. When each actor finished his or her scene, he or she climbed a staircase to the stage level where chairs were arranged on step platforms, and sat silently facing the audience. Every kind of story was presented, from that of the obvious young hunk who haunted baths to the bookish type who never even went to gay bars; from an old woman hemophiliac to the street hooker who still believed the doctors were wrong; from a small child whose mother was a dope addict to a drug taker and pusher; there was even an elderly esthete who dressed only in "Dorian grey" who thought he was above it all until he began getting sick. Acting sometimes confused, sometimes defiant, sometimes fearful, they wove their tales into a tapestry of words and pictures as imposing and touching as the famous national AIDS quilt that got a new section whenever another victim died.

At the finale, when all the performers had taken seats on the stage, they undid the strings tied to the backs of their chairs that held aloft white balloons and slowly, one by one, let them go. The balloons rose silently upward as the lights faded and disappeared by the time the stage went black. A full minute of silence followed and then the sold-out house went wild. Shouts of "Bravo!" mixed with tears and noisy hand clapping. It was one of the few times in the annals of Off Off Broadway when a cast returned willingly for more than one curtain call. I left after the fourth, and the ovations could still be heard out on the sidewalk. I tingled all over.

Waverly Place, just a block away from Sheridan Square, was as quiet as the square was lively. Turning into it from Christopher, I automatically began feeling for my keys. The fog had thinned a bit since leaving Cucarachas, but objects still had softened edges. This was the street where I'd lived and worked half my life. Three-

storied bricks repeated each other along the southern side, and a parochial school (later a nursing academy) took up half the block opposite them. Amid the townhouses was a small art gallery where few customers ever seemed to enter and the same paintings had been rotated in the windows for three decades. Next to it was where the late great comic actor James Coco had lived, and beside that, on the top floor, Leonard Frey, best remembered for his role as the pock-faced birthday boy in *THE BOYS IN THE BAND* (1967), died of AIDS just before Christmas. At that time of night I always looked for an ominous pearly stretch limo with its black windows perpetually closed tight, parked silently at the curb. It waited there round the clock with a driver up front to do its master's bidding; the master being a reputed Mafia chief who lived otherwise inconspicuously behind one of the unmarked doorways nearby.

A comfortable book store and a dressmaker's workshop guarded both sides of the intersection at 10th Street. After that, with the exception of two classic townhouses in the middle of the next block (one of which was occupied for years by anthropologist Margaret Meade, who used to shoot the breeze with us leaning on her ever-present, six-foot high carved walking stick from somewhere in the South Seas), the buildings, including mine, were six-story apartment houses. Opening the door to the vestibule, the only serious thought I gave to the anniversary of the founding of the foundation that took place in the rooms just beyond it, was to note that the night had marked the one hundred and third show I'd seen in the 1989-1990 season (of which approximately 10 percent would be taken under consideration for future grants to their producers), and laugh that there was a time a quarter century ago when I worried if I'd find anything to fund, anywhere.

Entering my first-floor studio (it was designated a semi-professional apartment when I signed the rent-controlled lease thirty years before), I passed quietly through the hallway and kitchen without turning on the lights, so as not to disturb my colleague and long-time apartment mate Arthur Schaefer already asleep in his bedroom, and on into the living room before taking off my jacket. I laughed to myself again, remembering one of the first times I came home from a performance and found him propped up in bed reading, so I briefly described the show, which happened to be a particularly wacky one, after which he gave me an incredulous look over his glasses and asked, "What the hell have you gotten yourself into?" I think he was still wondering that twenty-five years later.

Plunking down in my favorite chair, I tried to picture the room as it was when the first meeting of the Foundation was hastily held there. The furniture was basically the same, although what had passed for Danish Modern chairs would probably be called Danish Renaissance now, and the sofa had changed colors and covers a number of times. But the Mexican mirror from one of my summers in Taxco and the thrift shop cabinet I had found and repainted with Aztec warriors were still there unchanged. The bookcase filling one wall now held a collection of antique wind-up toys I started accumulating in the mid-seventies instead of the rare books and Inca pottery it contained then. A few scattered Orientals from the souks of Istanbul and Athens had been added later, but the old chrome and-glass coffee table, where four of us laid out our first business lunch of sliced ham and Swiss on Italian bread con Chianti, still sat there, once the height of fashion and now making a comeback. In the large alcove to one side was crammed the paraphernalia for making art—the paintings, sculptures, and prints that were my sole livelihood back then—that now shared time and space with the appurtenances for handling the activities of a Foundation. All in all, the setting was recognizable as the one where our little "theater of operation" became a reality that day in April 1965.

Missing from the scene, then and now, was the person whose dream the Foundation was and for whom it was named, so, for the same reason given for the need for anonymity at the beginning of this chapter, we will here call her Kate. Kate was no stranger to the studio earlier, though. We were friends from art school days, when I was trying to learn to be a better painter and she was studying design techniques that might prove helpful in film making, her current involvement. Her professional training was in acting, and she'd worked in New York theater in that capacity and stage directing; but she was also into modern dance and a staggering range of other proficiencies from writing to abstract art to fixing cars. The only two things I ever found

she disliked were museums (“repositories of the dead”) and opera (“three hours of excruciating boredom masquerading as art”). Her specialty, however, was people—all kinds. She was a good listener and genuinely interested, and when they sensed that, they opened up to her with surprising candor. As a result, she was never at a loss for subjects on which to expound. I liked it best when she put on her storyteller’s hat.

Inordinately tall, with patrician good looks and a stately grace, she created a stir wherever she made an entrance and had a way of crowding small spaces like my studio with her presence and barely contained electric energy. A born raconteur, she’d sit on the floor, propped up against the painted Aztecs, and regale us with tales of her recent exploits; or sketch word portraits of this or that young artist, writer, choreographer, filmmaker or dancer she was currently nurturing; or, more pointedly, mull over plans for the umpteenth time about implementing her most persistent and obsessive dream: that of being a benefactor to many more talented people struggling for individual expression in the performing arts and films with the creation some day of a philanthropic organization just for that purpose.

She never realized her dream. On February 6, 1965, she was killed with four others in the crash of a private plane as it attempted a landing on a tiny Caribbean island. She was thirty-five years old. If anything, her untimely death precipitated its implementation, for in her will she provided funds for its creation to take place within one year of her death.

Chapter Two

ACT 1, SCENE 1: APRIL 1965

It was two months later almost to the day that the three strangers and I sat cleaning up the picnic debris from my glass-topped table and got down to the business of reading the section of Kate's will that was relevant to our meeting. It stipulated that a charitable corporation be organized to "support and promote the performing arts and to assist and encourage those craftsmen working in the fields of theatre and motion pictures who have demonstrated potential talent and who are sincerely dedicated to developing and extending the boundaries of these art forms through growth of new and experimental ideas." The fellow next to me was the filmmaker Ed Emshwiller; the others were Kate's older sister and a family counselor, who were there to discuss our becoming advisors to help create and implement the new foundation.

Emshwiller was a natural choice to be the advisor on motion pictures. Beginning as a painter, he studied at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris and the Art Students League in New York, and eventually turned to illustration. He began making film "doodles" around 1952 and by 1956 was using the medium to record the progress of his paintings, as well as playing around with it as a means of expression in its own right. Coming from a visuals background, he staked out his territory in the non-narrative approach to film-making, beginning with a five-minute short, "Thanatopsis", in 1962 that celebrated color, movement, form, and space in direct relation to each other with no storyline or dialog. Critics had dubbed him a film "poet," and his work was shown extensively after that at museums and colleges in the U.S. and abroad. At the moment he was in the very forefront of the avant-garde and about to become a kind of guru to young students of film. He even looked the part: tall and thin, he could boast, at forty, the visage of an ancient patriarch with a high, rounded brow topped by a dark mane that reached his shoulders, and an imposing beard that began as wispy white fluff at his ears and narrowed to a grey bramble midway down his shirt front. He only attended that one meeting, for he subsequently moved to California to become involved with the American Film Institute in Los Angeles and was eventually made provost and dean of film and video at the California Institute of the Arts at Valencia. But it was on his advice that our earliest film grants were made, and he continued to keep us informed of new names and projects to consider.

I was another matter entirely. Invited to join the Foundation because it was believed that my close association with the deceased would ensure that its goals were in accordance with her wishes, I was given the task of seeking interesting experimental theater projects to fund. In truth, I attended parties that Kate gave which included any number of celebrities, and it was through her that I met Tennessee Williams, for example; but mainly we spent our evenings out together at dance recitals. She was an early champion of the Alwyn Nicolais Dance Company, housed then in the Henry Street Settlement downtown, and studied, but never performed with it.

I was strictly into the art scene then. But as a teenager, I had intentions of becoming a professional singer. Music had been a part of my family life for as long as I could remember, and every gathering of the clan ended with singing four-part harmony around the piano, usually played by my mother, who was an artist like her father and brother. I joined a local semiprofessional drama group in Medway, Massachusetts, a small rural community at the end of the commuter rail line from Boston, and the encouragement its members heaped on me, undeservedly, led me to Saturday classes at the Leland Powers School of Drama and Speech (later merged with Emerson College) in Back Bay, which in turn led to auditions and a slot as a song stylist on a weekly CBS network radio program called "Youth on Parade," where I lasted several years.

"Parade" originated at Station WHDH, Boston, and was broadcast nationwide, giving solo performers like me just enough celebrity to make us feel very important. The show had a full chorus and orchestra as well, and sometimes toured about in dilapidated buses, performing live at veterans' hospitals and theaters large

enough to accommodate it. On occasion it included "stars." One I never forgot was Ida Lupino, the sultry-voiced queen of Hollywood "roadhouse" flicks. She hadn't appeared in anything substantial for years, yet she turned out, surprisingly, to be a big draw. I found her monologues (that's all she did; as far as we knew she didn't dance or sing) crashing bores, but the crowds didn't seem to mind. Her (then blonde) presence in a pale blue Adrian creation—square shoulders with rhinestone epaulets, long, tight pointed sleeves, and a slinky skirt slashed to mid-thigh--was enough to make them hunch forward and drool.

Just before one scheduled performance at a suburban theater to entertain some psychiatric patients from a nearby veterans' hospital, with the curtain still down, there was great commotion at the stage-door entrance as four brawny fellows tried to hoist a stretcher up the narrow passageway to the wings with her nibs recumbent on top, made up and in costume. Out of the famous skirt slit, however, poked a new white plaster cast covering one leg to the knee. She had just broken a foot, but, in true show-biz tradition, insisted on appearing anyway. The men helped her onto a stool at mid stage, one trying to tug the gown over the obtrusive cast. But it proved too large and the skirt too skimpy, so a blue fox stole was brought on and draped over her lap like a blanket. Instinctively she lifted the good leg and crossed it over the stole to anchor it down, well aware of the impact it would have on her fans; she didn't have two of the greatest gams in Hollywood for nothing, even if only one was in shapely evidence.

When she was composed, the curtain was raised, and immediately men in wheelchairs went nuts at the sight. They banged on their wheels and some made growling noises. The nurses had to literally sit on some of them to calm them down. One man, however, escaped his attendant's grip and jumped onstage, foaming at the gills. Everyone ran in different directions. Ida, trying to get herself down off the stool, uncrossed the good leg. When she did, the big cast peeked out like a monstrous paw.

"Hey, look!" a voice shouted from the rear. "She's part polar bear!"

She was rescued and lifted offstage to the manager's office where she remained until everyone else left. Her husband, Collier Young, shook hands with each of us teenagers as we reboarded our bus, thanking us for helping his wife out in the melee. We noticed as the bus drove off that police were arriving and beginning to surround the building.

I later took singing lessons and spent a year and a half as a musicology major at Boston University. But I found my love for music far exceeded my ability to perform it and returned to drawing and painting, which I'd let lapse while I pursued the CAREER. In the end, I moved to New York to study art at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and the Art Students League.

What I lacked in theater expertise in my new role of talent scout, I made up for in zeal and determination to carry on as Kate might have done, remembering her head-on, fearless approach to the unknown, her impatience with mediocrity and disdain with the status quo. A mental portrait of her when she first descended on Joseph Hirsch's life class at the Art Students League in the late 1950s like a minor dynamo remained with me as a reminder. Arriving never less than twenty minutes late for morning sessions, she blew in on the tail end of a tornado—six feet of breathless energy, giant-stepping the dusty floorboards with the belt of her raincoat dragging behind like a lightning ground.

Tall as a basketball player, but well-proportioned and lithe, she would maneuver around the other students' bilious and bleeding palettes with all the dexterity of a trained dancer (which she was) and send restless ripples across the silent concentration that settled over the classroom like grey gauze. As she whizzed by, bodies shifted, coughed, and stamped their feet like petulant horses in a stable. By the time she reached her easel, usually next to mine, those nearest her instinctively felt her presence and, without looking up from their work, automatically moved aside or back slightly to accommodate her. We knew from experience that she demanded more creative space than we did, and figured it was safer to readjust early than be sorry later for bumped easels and overturned cans when she got down to the serious choreography of painting.

Impatiently doffing her coat and scarf in a heap, she'd pry open her paint box and position the broken slab of plate glass she used for a palette on a stool, then unfurl a greengrocer's apron that she snapped once in the air and tied twice around her waist. She'd go to retrieve her canvas, which was easy to spot, being the largest, wettest, and most warped in the drying racks, then return and lean it against the wall. Stepping back and squinting at it with a fresh eye, she'd invariably hate the results of the previous day's struggle and feel mild nausea. With a decisive shrug and sigh, she'd grab a palette knife (usually mine) and scrape off as much of the old paint as possible before propping the canvas back on the easel upside-down. Starting over was the only remedy. She seldom worked a painting for more than a day and hardly ever finished one. Like the legendary Sisyphus who was forever doomed in Hades to roll a heavy rock uphill only to have it roll back down again, she seemed incapable of getting beyond the nitty-gritty of creation to any kind of satisfying culmination (a trait that was to frustrate most of her undertakings).

The last step in her pre-painting preparation was to carefully roll up her sleeves above the elbows and tuck in the collar of her blouse all around the back of her neck. Then she was ready to battle the muse. Arms akimbo, she'd stare (or rather glare) at Hirsch's latest posing arrangement up front for a moment or two, making low clucking sounds of disapproval as she shook her head slowly.

Joe Hirsch was a very popular social realist painter and a superb colorist, and his following was large and enthusiastic. But he was an indifferent teacher, who, in place of criticism, offered ambiguous aphorisms that came across like Confucius sayings ("He who uses yellow lives in shade."), leaving his students puzzled and paralyzed. I remember standing there with arms folded, tapping the handle of my brush against my teeth and staring out in space in complete bewilderment after his rounds.

Kate liked Hirsch personally (we both were invited several times to his Upper West Side studio) and admired his color sense and brushwork. But she would have none of his busy nude-surrounded-by-a-heap-of-gnarled-fabrics-holding-a-phone kind of arrangements. So she set about deconstructing them on canvas with a vengeance. Slapping wide, pink strokes across and down the middle with a flat hardware store brush to suggest the model's pose and then scrubbing in big, solid, discordant pillow shapes around them, she deftly created a skeletal cartoon that revealed the silliness of the set-up, and in the process worked up such a sweat that the inner rim of her thick halo of chestnut hair was soon plastered black against her beady temples and brow, and she frequently had to wipe a forearm across her face to clear her eyes. It was at such times as this that minor accidents began to occur. Her elbows had a penchant for neighboring turpentine bottles, and a lot of time was spent mopping up messes caused by her exuberance. By the end of a session, she was sloshing about in a litter of soggy paper towels and echoed "I'm sorry's".

She treated paint like children treat mud, and the contrast between her splattered hands and clothes and the neatly smocked "paintresses" nearby with their fresh manicures tucked into cotton gloves to preserve them for lunch later at the Pierre, was hilarious. As my good friend and former president of the Art Students League, Lloyd Sherwood, was always quick to point out, many of the finest serious artists in America of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries studied there (Oscar Wilde tried to book in a lecture in 1882 and was turned down as too frivolous), but it always had to rely on the steady patronage of some contemporary variant of the Ladies-Who-Lunch to keep the fires stoked and the doors open. These paragons of gentility could still be found in ample numbers in all the classes, valiantly attempting to translate a moment of beauty to canvas in the short time they had between social engagements. They represented, as a matter of fact, the very class and lifestyle that Kate was continually rebelling against. But they probably didn't recognize her as a renegade from their own ranks as they eyed her warily over their half-glasses.

"She's all over the place, isn't she?" one of them stage-whispered to another once when Kate suddenly twenty-yard dashed to the back of the room for a long shot look at her canvas, catching her toe in the strap of the lady's parked Gucci purse and pulling it with her.

"Incorrigible," muttered her companion, working a tiny spot of vermilion into the model's cheek.

To them, she was as unpredictable and disturbing as a bull in a china shop. To me she was a breath of fresh air.

I was intent on having the Foundation reflect Kate's spirit in every way, but knew that eventually it would need my own stamp of originality to be a thriving, relevant entity for the future. Though the emphasis would be on experimental, uncommercial explorations, I decided to first familiarize myself with all aspects of performance available at the moment by seeing everything and anything being done on a stage—a personally created crash course in Theater 101 with all New York City as the campus. In some ways, I was luckier than Ed Emshwiller: I had no reputation or expectations to uphold and got to start from scratch. The next year was as much fun as I ever had in my life.

ON. OFF. OFF OFF. (1965)

My first semester in class didn't begin very auspiciously. There was precious little at first to stimulate interest. If you were to shout the one-syllable words of the heading above loudly and quickly, they would approximate the sounds Little Orphan Annie's dog Sandy made in the beloved comic strip. And, like Sandy, the first half of the 1965-1966 Broadway season was all bark and no bite. The theater year in New York is traditionally the period beginning June 1 of one year and ending May 31 the next. All through that summer and fall, work was presented that either folded shortly or had not artistic significance at all. On Broadway, of course, a hit means anything that makes money. There's no such thing as artistic success that isn't all financially so. None of the established playwrights came up with anything provocative enough to stand in line to get tickets for. Even Off Broadway was wallowing on the edge of stagnation.

Perhaps we were expecting too much too soon. In June of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in office less than two years since the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and already embroiled in the Vietnam disaster, raised all our hopes by signing the bill establishing the National Foundation on the Arts, which comprised the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Little did any of us know what a mess it would become in twenty-five years. Invited to a great, glittering state ceremony in Washington, the country's most outstanding personalities in the arts arrived in flashbulbed optimism and euphoria. Only one famous person, the playwright Arthur Miller, refused to attend in protest against Johnson's foreign policy. There were to be rumblings later in some significant areas of the community to add to his, but for the moment his jab was just a small splinter in the Big Foot Forward that we all anticipated. Dancers ironed their tutus and potters dusted off their wheels. The great day for Art for Everyone was at hand.

Then on New Year's Day, 1966, New York got itself a new mayor. Hizzoner John V. Lindsay moved into Gracie Mansion and the theater community reveled again at the prospect of a kindred spirit and avowed avid theatergoer at the helm. Youthful, witty, and with the looks of a matinée idol, he was quickly dubbed the "player mayor": a double epithet that also alluded to his seemingly casual attitude in the face of municipal crises that some took for insincerity. (Many years later, at a reception at Lincoln Center, I asked him if he remembered the term and he answered, "No. Because I was called much worse things than that, and I only remember the really bad ones." He did recall, however, going on TV during a particularly severe drought and recommending everyone "shower with a friend." That, he smiled broadly at the memory, got him in a whole lot of hot water.)

He was to do much for the performing arts generally during his terms in office. It was he, for example, who made it possible for builders of new skyscrapers in midtown Manhattan to receive certain concessions if they also designed theater spaces into their structures that could be used rent-free or at minimal fees for new experimental productions. He encouraged film companies to set up locations in the city, with such successful response that at times there seemed to be a famous movie star reclining between takes in a canvas-back chair

on every third street corner, signing autographs for everyone's Aunt Millie. He added glamour to the job and introduced a whole legion of young governmental talents who went on to serve well for many years. Even after leaving office, he himself was treated as a star; his appointment secretary was my next-door neighbor and often told of not being able to handle the masses of invitations she received every week requesting his presence at some function or other, often involving the arts. And in 1990 he was still at it, now as Chairman of Lincoln Center Theater.

ON

If these bonuses augured well for New York generally, they weren't causing any ripples in Tunes Square puddles at the moment. The only hot tickets were for hits carried over from previous seasons: Jerry Herman's HELLO DOLLY!, which had been around for two seasons, seemed destined to go on forever (the title song having been so popular, President Johnson borrowed it for his reelection campaign ditty, changing the lyrics to "Hello, Lyndon..."); FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, with music by Jerry Block and lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, and book by Joseph Stein, based on Sholem Aleichem stories; and from London, THE ROAR OF THE GREASEPAINT—THE SMELL OF THE CROWD, with Anthony Newley and Cyril Ritchard. Neil Simon had two plays running: THE ODD COUPLE, carried over from 1964-1965, and BAREFOOT IN THE PARK, from 1963-1964. Frank Gilroy's THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES, which had won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award the previous year, was still packing them in, but nothing new was immediately in the offing.

Off Broadway wasn't faring much better as far as new works were concerned. A few revivals were still playing: the APA-Phoenix Repertory was doing Shaw's MAN AND SUPERMAN and a dramatic adaptation of Tolstoy's WAR AND PEACE; Mr. Miller's A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE followed on the success of his INCIDENT AT VICHY the previous year at Lincoln Center Repertory (that was produced just before the co-directors Robert Whitehead and Elia Kazan got sacked. Whitehead claimed they were "wrongfully discharged" by William Schuman, the president of Lincoln Center, causing a mess that would not be solved for years).

About the only thing people had to look forward to in the entertainment field were the Motion Picture Academy Awards which, as it turned out, were garnered by two films that had been Broadway hit plays first: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS, which won Best Picture, Best Actor (Paul Scofield), Best Director (Fred Zinnerman); and Edward Albee's WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?, that got Best Actress (Elizabeth Taylor) and Best Supporting Actress (Sandy Dennis). Ironically, Albee's TINY ALICE, a murder tale concerning a lay brother who is seduced by a weird millionairess and killed in a strange ritual that tests his faith, was the most-discussed play of 1964-1965, but failed at the box office in spite of stellar performances by John Gielgud and Irene Worth, and didn't make it into the next season.

So, with no great anticipation I halfheartedly bought tickets for a new musical that was about to open in my own neighborhood, two blocks away in Washington Square. A makeshift tent had been erected on the southeast corner of the square in an empty lot. It was officially called the ANTA Washington Square Theater, and this was to be its home until more permanent digs were established uptown. I was curious to see what was being done there, and two factors made it attractive: it was a short walk home, and the previews were cheaper prices. So cheap, in fact, that I induced my buddy Arthur to go along.

The theater was only half-filled at curtain time—an indication that perhaps this wasn't the most convenient location for people to get to. It was drafty and chilly, and the three-sided tiered rows were cramped. Once seated, all there was to look at was a bare platform against the stark bare wall. But when the lights dimmed and the orchestra struck up the overture, we knew in minutes this would be the smash hit of the season. (It took a while. Several months passed before performances sold out regularly and the ubiquitous line of accompanying parked limousines lolled along the edge of the park like sleek hippos.) The show was THE MAN

OF LA MANCHA. It was a first for Dale Wasserman, who wrote the book, and Mitch Leigh and Joe Darion, who wrote the music and lyrics. Although it opened actually Off Broadway (and many considered it an Off Broadway show), it was technically a Broadway production and had all Broadway contracts, so the team could claim their first Broadway hit as well.

It has essentially a play-within-a-play structure: Cervantes tells his tales of Don Quixote while in prison himself and acts them out for fellow inmates. The few props needed were carried on by the actors, and the whole atmosphere of a seamy, filthy dungeon was got by the lighting, choreography by Jack Cole, and a most clever stage device: a ladder that was lowered from the ceiling, immediately giving the impression of a subterranean space.

The star was Richard Kiley, and mention of his name in the future always brought to mind the role he became so closely identified with: the Man himself; and whenever songs from the musical were sung later by other artists, they were compared to his interpretations. THE MAN OF LA MANCHA won a number of prizes, among them the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, and besides Kiley had an excellent cast, including Robert Rounseville, Ray Middleton, and as the servant girl, Joan Diener.

As if sparking a trend, three other new musicals appeared on the heels of THE MAN OF LA MANCHA and became instant hits. The first was SUPERMAN, or to give it its original title, IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE, IT'S SUPERMAN, and it was also a first for its writers David Newman and Robert Benton and composer and lyricist Charles Strouse and Lee Adams. It was lifted almost intact off the pages of the comics and given three-dimensionality by that wizard of a stage director, Harold Prince, and a cast that included Bob Holiday as Clark Kent, Michael O'Sullivan as the arch villain, and Jack Cassidy as a newspaperman.

Waiting in the wings and just bursting to go on was another musical that I had to admit liking a lot more than SUPERMAN. It was MAME. Based on the book Auntie Mame by Patrick Dennis, it had already lived several previous lives on stage and in film as a straight play, starring Rosalind Russell. What was new here was the incomparable score by Jerry Herman that, in time (like almost everything he wrote), became a part of everybody's shower stall repertoire. Played to the hilt by Angela Lansbury in the title role and Beatrice Arthur as her friendly adversary, the cast also claimed Jane Connell as the eternal wimp, Agnes Gooch. Once seen, it was hard to forget such lines as those Mame shouts at poor Agnes as Agnes tries to get herself gussied up glamorously for a night out, and as usual, without much success: "For God's sake, Agnes, shave under your arms. You look like King Kong!" or Bea Arthur on a swing high overhead singing, "The man in the moon is a lady..."

The show claimed a special slot in my memory bank for it was soon after its opening that Jerry Herman passed the Waverly Gallery on Washington Square on the way home to his Ninth Street basement apartment and saw a painting of mine in the window that he knew he had to own. It depicted a carnival vendor, back-to, in shirt sleeves and rumpled working pants held up by faded suspenders. He carried shopping bags that overflowed with little pink and white kewpie dolls on sticks, floating in clouds of pastel tulle. Their pale blonde curls were encircled by tinsel halos, and thin gauze wings sprouted from their backs. Their bright, stunned faces looked blankly in all directions. As light and ethereal as they appeared, the man's shoulders were weighed down by the burden, and his partly turned head under a battered felt hat searched the gloomy near distance for a likely place to hawk his flimsy illusions.

Jerry told me years later that the painting went with him wherever he moved—from the basement apartment on Ninth Street to the townhouse on Tenth, to California, and back to the upper East Side of Manhattan. He saw it as a metaphor for Show Business.

The other musical that appeared was SWEET CHARITY, whose opening will be remembered because it was at the newly refurbished Palace Theater on Broadway after its rescue from years as a round-the-clock movie house. Neil Simon's book for the show, about a seedy dance hall, chalked up a third Broadway hit for him, running at the same time as the two mentioned holdovers. The story was thin, but the choreography of

Bob Fosse and the athletic performance of its star, Gwen Verdon, kept things bubbling nicely.

As if someone had blown a whistle, one interesting drama after another showed up to be counted, all of them from abroad. John Osborne's *INADMISSIBLE EVIDENCE*, a character analysis of a middle-aged lawyer (played by Nicol Williamson) who feels life is not just passing him by, but kicking him in the shins and stomping on his values along the way. Whatever little gesture he makes to retrieve his self-respect is dashed, and he ends the play pleading for sympathy—and love.

THE ROYAL HUNT FOR THE SUN arrived next in feathered splendor—an exotic play in an exotic setting in which the playwright Peter Shaffer arranges a meeting (in mind and body) between the Conquistador Pizarro (Christopher Plummer) and the legendary Inca ruler Atahualpa (David Carradine). It is as much a brilliant pageant as a play, but it has a plot centered around Pizarro's unwilling admiration for the king, to the point where he begins to think of him as a god, and ends by killing him to try to prove the Inca's immortality. But the ruler does not revive, and Pizarro is left with what every man must face, the fact of death. Staged by John Dexter, it bordered on Radio City Music Hall extravagance, what with one glittering costume after another parading before an enormous gold sunburst, but Carradine's simple, regal portrayal (occasionally startlingly naked) carried the show.

Brian Friel's *PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME* was a far less pretentious work about an Irish father and son and their inability to show each other any affection or concern when the son decides to emigrate to Philadelphia. Searingly honest, it was the kind of play you walked away from limp from emotional exhaustion.

Of all the sudden rush of imports, however, the one that stays most vividly in mind was Peter Weiss's *MARAT/SADE*, officially titled *THE PERSECUTION AND ASSASSINATION OF MARAT AS PERFORMED BY THE INMATES OF THE ASYLUM OF CHARENTON UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE*. It was an instant sell-out and won the New York Drama Critics' Award for Best Foreign Play. In it, the Marquis de Sade stages the assassination of Marat in the madhouse, using inmates as actors, to impress his aristocratic friends who watch on little gilded chairs in elegant attire. It is a devastating indictment of the French who, after solving the problem of the aristocracy by chopping off their heads, went right on to embrace Napoleon's megalomania.

The staging itself, however, made the play, and the star was its director Peter Brook. His manipulation of the madhouse scenes was ingenious. Spastic, drooling, misshapen creatures in tattered white rags milled about forming grotesque tableaux within a dirty white three-sided enclosure, often giving the appearance of a three-dimensional, bleached-out Hieronymous Bosch painting. The scene where Ian Richardson, as the paranoid inmate playing Marat, stood naked (back to the audience) before his famous tin bathtub, ranting and screaming at the mob, still sends shivers up memory's spine.

As the season of 1965-1966 wound down, four American plays hopped quickly on board, and three of them became hits. The one that didn't was the one everyone expected would—*THE LION IN WINTER*, James Goldman's comedy about a Christmas get-together in 1183 of the cantankerous Plantagenets and unbending Capets. The rivalry for the crown of their father, Henry II (Robert Preston), by his three unruly sons, the future Richard I, Geoffrey, and the future King John, and the machinations of their mother, his queen Eleanor of Aquitaine (Rosemary Harris), whom he has imprisoned again for her rebelliousness, keep the old man spinning in circles. The last-scene confrontation between Henry and Eleanor before she is shipped off to another prison-castle, was a masterpiece of acting by Harris and Preston, and even hinted at the thorny love they still shared but were too proud to admit. Noel Willman directed it with great style, and Christopher Walken, in a supporting role of the young, fey, but dangerous King Philip of France, was a standout. The play never really caught on, however, even with word of mouth throughout the theater community and good press by critics like Walter Kerr of the *Herald Tribune* who praised the acting as the best on Broadway in decades.

WAIT UNTIL DARK was a sweaty-palms thriller by Frederick Knott about the plight of a blind girl (Lee Remick) confronted in her apartment by a diabolical intruder (Robert Duvall) who mistakenly believes there

is heroin stashed away there, and in the process of searching for it, terrorizes her mercilessly—at one point on a totally darkened stage, with only the sounds of their voices and breathing to indicate their whereabouts. The play built to a climax with a fateful twist that made some of the audience scream, as every good thriller should. Again, for me, the play was less than the players, who were both in top form and exercising every ounce of their considerable talents.

CACTUS FLOWER was a comedy adapted by Abe Burrows from a French play, FLEUR DE CACTUS, by Pierre Barillet and Jean-Pierre Gredy. Sexual attraction was the relentless theme, and it was stretched out to infinity in endless variations, some hilarious, some not. Burrows transposed the setting to a young dentist's office in New York City, and the situations based on local color assured it built-in laughs. The best thing about this play was Lauren Bacall, whose transformation from a cold, no-nonsense nurse to a gorgeous, sexy creature with gams-without-end-amen, was a delight. To get away with what she had to get away with on the stage called for the perfect timing and an inborn sense of comedy which she proved to have in abundance.

The last of the new American plays that went on to be hits was another comedy called GENERATION by William Goodhart. It addressed itself to the generation gap between a middle-aged advertising executive (Henry Fonda) whose entire energy seems to be devoted to making money, and who reasons that the more he makes, the higher the standards of taste he imparts, and his very pregnant daughter who marries her lover (just before giving birth), a bohemian photographer from Greenwich Village, against her father's wishes. The different values that each man places on his life create seeds of tension and are the gist of the play, pitting the self-deluded, uptight button-down against the complacent (possibly also self-deluded) beaded beatnik.

Two plays that I saw that year that deserve mention, one British, one American, would probably, in other, saner times, have been produced Off Broadway, where their off-beat black comedy might have been better received. They both flopped, but not without first making a splash. The British import, ENTERTAINING MR. SLOANE, was done later by Off Off Broadway companies with far more success, and its author, Joe Orton, whose Broadway debut this was, became something of a cult hero, even after his tragic murder by his lover.

MR. SLOANE was black, black comedy. A young, sexy-evil hunk who is discovered to be a murderer moves in with a strange family of three, brought home one day by the middle-aged brother for purposes of sex. The house is a run-down shambles in the midst of an enormous junkyard, and the housekeeper is the middle-aged ditsy sister. A potty old father lurks absentmindedly in the shadows and is the one who discovers Mr. Sloane's criminal status. When Mr. Sloane first moves in, he is a kind of cock-of-the-roost (literally!), making impossible demands for attention and favors, and drives the sister, who can't seem to keep her hands off him, simply wild. After a harrowing one-sided fight in which the old man is done in and dumped behind the sofa, Mr. Sloane, and we, can begin to see the graffiti on the wall, as both simpering siblings grab his arms and force him down onto the cushions between them, clawing at his various parts like predators. They coyly assure him that his past will not be revealed as long as he complies with all their demands, which appear to be heavily S & M, and the play ends with Mr. Sloane staring pathetically at the audience, both realizing that he has escaped the law only to become a prisoner of love. Dudley Sutton played the snaky Mr. Sloane; the sister was Sheila Hancock; the brother, Lee Montague; and the wheezing old man, George Turner.

The American play was Edward Albee's dramatized version of the James Purdy novel Malcolm. It was produced by Theater 1966, a company founded by Edward Albee, Richard Barr, and Charles Woodward, to present works of new playwrights in professional settings. The name was to change with each corresponding year, i.e., Theater 1967, Theater 1968, etc. This talented triumvirate would later attempt, unsuccessfully, to bring repertory theater to Broadway in such legitimate venues as the Billy Rose, but I remember them best for their excellent presentations at the Cherry Lane Theater in Greenwich Village.

MALCOLM is another black comedy, this time full of symbolism. In it an innocent fifteen-year old youth, whom we first see ensconced on a large shiny golden chair or throne at the center of a raised platform at the back of the stage, descends to the "real" world where he encounters every imaginable temptation on the way,

including: friends who corrupt then betray him; wealth, art, and luxury that contaminate him; encounters with depravity, such as an episode with a fowl-mouthed slut (played broadly and hilariously by Estelle Parsons); and finally, disastrous love and marriage to a pop singer that ultimately ruins him. The entire show was a relentless exercise in "camp," and the actors had a great time over-acting and upstaging. Besides Parsons as the ultimate bitch-whore, Ruth White left an indelible impression as a smothering middle-aged hoyden.

In a sense it was theater of the "absurd," and as such it was roundly panned by the critics. The symbolism was all too obvious, the acting intentionally ridiculous. But, for me, it was a refreshing antidote to the slick fare that had been seen earlier on Broadway and a fine introduction to the other forms of New York theater.

At this point it might be enlightening to attempt to define Off and Off Off Broadway as they appeared in 1966.

No one is certain when the term "Off Broadway" was first introduced, but by the time it was in general use, the rebellious movement it described had already established itself as an alternate theater experience. It meant theater that was being performed "away" from Broadway in a physical as well as spiritual sense, away from the commercial entity Broadway had become with the almighty box office as its sole arbiter of taste, away from the block-buster musicals and vapid comedies that pandered to the broadest level of public consumption.

Its forerunners were the groups that emerged nearly thirty-five years earlier in the "Village" and upper East Side, most notably George Cram Cook's Provincetown Players, a truly experimental group that divided its time between New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts, and included the playwright Eugene O'Neill, who was a member for over ten years. It presented a series of his one-act plays beginning with BOUND EAST FOR CARDIFF in 1916, and later several longer ones including THE HAIRY APE in 1922. Cook set the tradition for those who would follow in his insistence on remaining small, avoiding professional and commercial pressures, and simply doing the work. He found a tiny jewel of a place for a workshop—the Provincetown Playhouse at 133 MacDougal Street, in the block of bricks just south of Washington Square Park, where MacDougal is still quite proper after its encounter with the genteel apartment buildings taking the sun along the park's western edge, and before it drops its guard at the next corner and turns on the rock-and-roll, orders falafel on pita bread, sips cappuccino, spreads out the hand-wrought Zodiac earrings, and trails off in a multi-colored ribbon of leftover Hippie day-glo toward Bleecker Street.

The theater building was deserted throughout most of the 1970s. But every time I passed it, I felt a momentary nostalgia for its past that I never experienced but still sensed at its padlocked entrance. It came back to life again slowly with a few shows (that mostly flopped) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but by 1990 it was packing them in for a long-running transvestite extravaganza by, and starring, Charles Busch, entitled VAMPIRE LESBIANS OF SODOM.

The Washington Square Players was another group that flourished in the Village in the 1920s, as did the Neighborhood Playhouse uptown on 54th Street, that is still the breeding ground for important new talent. In 1926, Eva LeGallienne founded and acted in the Civic Repertory Theatre that prospered through the 1930s, and, with Margaret Webster, created the American Repertory Theatre in 1945. A formidable talent, she continued tirelessly through the 1960s and 1970s, directing and acting in the National Repertory Theatre, the APA-Phoenix Theatre, and the American Shakespeare Festival.

OFF

It is generally conceded that Off Broadway in its modern sense began with the production of Tennessee Williams' SUMMER AND SMOKE at the Circle-In-The-Square Theater in Sheridan Square in 1952, although

there are those who insist it was with Julie Bovasso's mounting of Jean Genet's *THE MAIDS* in 1955; and still others, that it was when Joseph Papp presented free Shakespeare performances throughout the boroughs of New York City on the back of a traveling trailer truck in 1957. In any event, they all had an impact on the new phenomenon, which in its early stages was more concerned with reviving American plays of the past, some of which had played and failed on Broadway, such as *SUMMER AND SMOKE*, and Eugene O'Neill's *THE ICEMAN COMETH* (in 1956), or European classics like Ibsen and Chekhov that had been done mainly in college settings, than with presenting new work by untried young playwrights, or even new forms of theater.

The Circle-In-The-Square, under Ted Mann and Paul Libin, was a theater in the guise of a café, or vice versa, depending on which city official was inspecting the premises at the time. Actually, it looked most like a night club, which I think it was originally. The entrance, up a few steps from the street, led through a dark, narrow hallway that opened onto a fairly spacious, low-ceilinged room, polka-dotted throughout with small round tables and chairs in front of a raised stage that jutted out from the end wall. The place had a comfortable, faintly seedy air about it that seemed to nurture a warm ambience among the gathering of like-spirits it attracted for the early performances.

April 24, 1952, was the exact date the production opened, and it is emblazoned in memory and history books with an aura that provokes nodding sighs. *SUMMER AND SMOKE* was the first major success in the New York theater south of 42nd Street in thirty years. This was a second airing of the beleaguered drama after its Broadway disaster. Williams wrote it in 1948, and after this Circle-In-The-Square triumph, it went on to have as many alterations as a Hong Kong suit. Williams totally rewrote it later, changing the name to *THE ECCENTRICITIES OF A NIGHTINGALE*, and it played first in London in 1964, then again Off Broadway, and then in 1976-1977 on Broadway in a further rewritten version that had its premiere at the Studio Arena of Buffalo.

For its director, Jose Quintero, it was the beginning of a long line of distinguished productions at Circle-In-The-Square and elsewhere, including the Broadway run of the revival of O'Neill's *A MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN* with Colleen Dewhurst and Jason Robards in 1973-1974, and another O'Neill classic, *ANNA CHRISTIE*, starring Liv Ullman in 1976-1977. It made an "overnight" star of the young actress playing the lead, Geraldine Page. Like all actors who have struggled, worked at odd jobs, played minor roles in minor plays to gain experience, and then auditioned and auditioned for that one chance to grab the gold ring of fame, she had been around the block a few times, and the sudden notoriety wasn't all that instant. What helped, besides her already unique voice and mannerisms, was the role that was more challenging than any other she'd done up to that time. I missed that milestone since I didn't attend theater regularly until 1953. But I saw a number of subsequent productions there and remember especially Quintero's 1956 revival of O'Neill's classic, *THE ICEMAN COMETH*, a harrowing portrayal of a group of social misfits unable to live without illusions, starring Jason Robards.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The Circle-In-The-Square Theater's name formed an interesting logo, but didn't precisely describe its location in the very heart of Greenwich Village. The open area it faced, Sheridan Square, wasn't a square at all, but a long triangle formed by the branching off of Washington Place from West 4th Street, with a tiny lane connecting them again as the small end of the triangle to the east, a lane that would eventually be named Charles Ludlam Place for the founder of The Ridiculous Theatrical Company, whose theater entrance was on it. (The adjacent little park around the corner with the statue of General Sherman was technically Christopher Street Park.) In the 1980s, the triangle was transformed into a beautiful pizza slice of a garden enclosed by a wrought-iron fence. But back in the 1950s, it was a mean stretch of asphalt, pock-marked with stray parked motorcycles and abandoned cars collecting traffic violation notices on their windshields like sprouting corsages. On warm days, the actors and crew played catch among the vehicles during rehearsal breaks. And on

any day or night, in any weather, one could walk into Louie's Bar next door to the theater and encounter a beehive of young thespians talking shop over the din of a bubbling jukebox.

The interior of the Circle was not round, but as noted, a relatively large, low-ceilinged square room. The entire complex took up two adjacent brownstones thrown together under one awning, and housed at one given time any number of participating writers, directors, and actors under one roof.

Across 4th Street, the lane became Barrow Street, where midway along the block was a restaurant that catered to all the actors, students, writers, and artists who inhabited the quarter. Its blue-plate specials were generous and nourishing, and the prices were always right. Weekday mornings, the young actors would dash in as though they really had someplace important to go, order cup after cup of double-sugared coffee, and queue up to the solitary pay phone in the vestibule. When all appointments for the day had been arranged, they would vacate the "office" and return to their rooms in the walk-ups on the other side of the street. These were four-to-six story bricks built in the middle of the 19th century that boasted ornate, gargoyle-guarded doorways with high concrete steps that spilled out onto the unsuspecting sidewalk like stuck-out tongues. There the stage hopefuls would change into presentable, impression-making clothes and set out on their eternal rounds of auditions and acting and dance classes.

I moved into the neighborhood in the fall of 1953, to the 6th floor walkup apartment of my friend Arthur Schaefer. I'd left some of my gear there to drive down through Mexico with three other companions that summer and planned to stay only until I found a suitable place of my own upon returning. Days passed, however, then weeks, months, a year, and eventually I gave up visiting real estate agents: the arrangement had become comfortable for both of us, and my residence became permanent.

Our building was several behind the Circle-In-The-Square on Barrow Street, where local legend had it that in the basement Ruth McKenney (Branston) lived with her sister briefly in the mid-1930s and wrote a collection of delightful tales about life in the Village entitled *My Sister Eileen*, published in 1938. Other sources claimed the address was 14 Gay Street, several blocks away. But many years later, when the best seller had been converted into a hit play, and then a musical, *WONDERFUL TOWN*, starring Rosalind Russell, both sites were pointed out by shrewd tour guides on their routes. (In fact, the only landmark actually mentioned by name in the book was Sheridan Square. The subterranean pair of rooms she and her sister shared were described as being over the Christopher Street subway station, and when trains passed underneath, the floor shook so violently that chairs danced and the clumps of green algae that decorated the bathroom shifted positions. All the buildings on our block were over the subway, and the algae was indigenous to all the below-ground habitats. So, it might have been anywhere on Barrow Street or Seventh Avenue South, but could hardly have been on Gay Street, where no subways were located.)

Our building and the top floor flat we occupied were representative of most in the neighborhood. The street door, never locked, was stuck open, winter and summer, by layers of built-up black enamel applied periodically in place of cleaning. Its Tabernacle Gothic contours were blurred by what looked like bubbling lava threatening to invade the central frosted glass panel. Inside, the hallway was lit round the clock by a halo fluorescent on the pressed-tin ceiling. The walls were peel-green above a dado of marbleized tan tiles that escorted the elderly stone treads of the staircase up a square spiral to the roof.

Usually one or more of the ancient Italian widows who were residents could be encountered on the stairs, their white hair pulled back in tight buns. When they were in black, it meant Mass day, and they'd make their way over to Bleecker Street and Carmine to pray before a clothed statue of the Virgin in Our Lady of Pompeii R. C. Church, whose interior, lit with Christmas lights and garlanded with tinsel year-round, had the air of a perpetual festival. If they weren't in black, they were wrapped in floral housecoats and scuffed their backless slippers out to the front stoop for a little gossip and sunshine. Many of them had lived there thirty or forty years and could remember when the entire quarter spoke only their language and was called Little Italy. Most lived alone by choice; their kids, long since escaped to the suburbs, only returned long enough to pick them

up for occasional Sunday outings in wide sedans kept idling at the curb.

Besides transient actors and young professionals who were only marking time in the house until fame and/or fortune whisked them off to Hollywood and Vine or the greenness of the other Greenwich (Connecticut), there was a solid core of individualists like me who had decided to sink roots in the Village to await success, satisfied to take up occupations for survival that didn't distract us from the Big Goal up ahead, like compiling quotes for Chinese fortune cookie manufacturers (there were two: both Jewish-owned, both in Brooklyn, and both paid by the hundred lines), or editing obscure and never-to-be-read books on exotic places and cultures never experienced, all of which left ample free time for hanging out in local eateries and sidewalk cafés. I once overheard a tourist waiting to board a chartered bus back to nowhere exclaim to another in Sheridan Square, "Everybody here seems to live on the street. Don't any of them work?"

Our fifth-floor walk-up apartment was also typical of the "cold-water-railroad-flat" genre that proliferated in the area, but the term, at least in our sense, was slightly misleading: there was hot water supplied twice a day, morning and night, though in midwinter it ran tepid enough to require a kettle of boiling water on the stove for bathing; and "railroad flat" indicated only that the rooms were arranged one after another like railroad cars, not that it was a smoke-charred hovel at the edge of a train yard.

The entrance was through the kitchen, with the living room to the right and one small bedroom to the left. The stellar attraction in the kitchen was a claw-footed, cast-iron bathtub that squatted next to the entrance, followed by a dinky sink in the corner. The tub had a hinged lid that doubled as a counter and stepping place for reaching overhead shelves with glass-paned doors. Across a lumpy stretch of linoleum flooring, a skinny-legged little stove and a big fat refrigerator did a Laurel and Hardy imitation against the opposite wall that had been painstakingly stripped to the bare brick. Baring the bricks was a rite of passage when moving into new flats in the Village in the 1950s and 1960s: it made it definably yours, somehow, like spreading scent to mark animal territory. That, and avocado plants, grown from pits, set on black-painted floors made the definitive decorative New York statement for the time.

A puny gas heater, cowering under the sole kitchen window in utter failure, was the sole source of heat for all three rooms. So, in the dead of winter, it was necessary to turn on the stove jets for adequate warmth, which in turn caused condensation on the windows and small rivulets of water to course down the walls. That window, though, looked out over the surrounding rooftops, offering a spectacular view. When I wasn't using its light to paint by, I'd often stare through it by the hour, tracking a January storm over distant New Jersey, perhaps, or marvel as an easterly gale erased the lead from a March sky.

The focal point of the living room was a black Victorian fireplace with a scowling frown of a mantle in the center of one wall. It had long ago ceased to function and acted as a niche for rhododendron branch arrangements (locally called faggot leaves) or dried sprays. From the middle of the low ceiling hung a bastard chandelier assembled from found brass cherubs and multifarious filigree collected from the streets and wired together into one grand and totally inappropriate Baroque flourish: inappropriate in that during the dog days of summer, with the tarred roof directly above it absorbing all the sun's rays, its long tapered candles melted over at the end of each afternoon into impotent limp pricks; conversely, in winter, the cold winds penetrating the ceiling cracks prevented them from staying lit. One of the two windows in the room gave onto a fire escape that became a temporary bedroom in August. There, on a mattress under the stars, one could stare down at the night life on Seventh Avenue and listen to the music from the little piano bars on the side streets, two of which, Marie's Crisis and the Duplex, were still going strong into the 1990s.

In late 1956, the occupants of the entire block, including the Circle-In-The-Square, received eviction notices. The buildings were to be razed to make room for a high-rise apartment/supermarket complex, the first and only major renovation of that quarter of the Village for the next twenty-five years. During the months after the notices, pathetic piles of abandoned match stick blinds and avocado plants dotted the sidewalks as, one by one, we vacated the premises. First, the Italian *anticas* and their rosaries; then the over-ripe Wagne-

rian soprano who practiced scales all day on the second floor; next went Rex, a young artist who painted quasi-religious pictures featuring bulls and birds tattooed all over with early Christian symbols, which he worked on from a rocking chair in the wee hours of the morning, driving the tenants beneath him crazy with the constant creaking. Last to leave was Tony on the fourth floor, a cocktail pianist with sights on Carnegie Hall, who had to hire special equipment and men to move the grand piano that filled most of his living room, and under which we had to sprawl on cushions when visiting him. Just before him, Frankie, who lived opposite us, departed with boxes full of photos of nude street punks he made a living taking and peddling to, of all things, army camps; a special trip up the stairs had to be made to retrieve his collection of sumptuous evening gowns he loved to get into and dance nights away at notorious drag balls like Phil Black's yearly Thanksgiving bash in Harlem. By then, all the aspiring actors, singers, and dancers had also left and the wreckers began their serious desecration.

It was ironic and portentous that the very landmark of Off Broadway's beginnings should be destroyed at the time that the movement was outgrowing its baby shoes anyway. Off Broadway had become enormously successful, beyond the wildest dreams of its originators. New York audiences were indicating their interest in theater experiences other than that of the Great White Way. Ticket sales soared. Performances were selling out. Even musicals, long the slaves of Broadway, were being liberated from mid-town. *THE THREEPENNY OPERA*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, opened in 1956 at the Theatre de Lys on Christopher Street, and not only put them back on the map, but went on to win the first Obie award for Best Musical. The Obies (from the first letters of Off and Broadway) were originated that year by a new weekly newspaper, *The Village Voice*, in recognition of extraordinary achievements in the field of alternative theater.

Other Obie "Firsts" went that year to *UNCLE VANYA*, by Chekhov, for Best Production, *ABSALOM*, by Lionel Abel, for Best New Play, and two awards for Best Actor to Jason Robards, Jr., for *THE ICEMAN COMETH*, and George Voskovec for *UNCLE VANYA*. Jose Quintero won the first Best Director prize for *THE ICEMAN COMETH*. *The Village Voice*, by the way, was to be another long-time Sheridan Square institution in yet another thin wedge of a space at Seventh Avenue South and Christopher Street, until success and the need for expansion forced it to larger quarters on University Place.

Off Broadway was such a success that in a few years it was accepted as an alternative theater experience by both veteran audiences and a younger generation of playgoers who found in its relaxed format and reasonable ticket pricing a pleasant introduction to classic stage literature. Before long, however, as might have been predicted, its very popularity caused sponsors to revert to the old "hit" or "flop" mentality of Broadway. Generated income began dictating what kinds of plays would be produced, and the tendency was to play it safe. Off Broadway was seen increasingly as a tryout venue for Broadway. This thinking imposed the distance between the writer and his work that was the reason for the flight from Times Square in the first place. The newly developed writer-director-actor partnership was threatened by the intervention of administrators—producers, business managers, publicists, etc.—whose sole purpose, again, was to make money.

By the time the Circle-In-The-Square was forced to vacate its physical setting, it had already returned to the commercial route of the "legitimate" producing company, mounting classics, first, then revivals of established earlier American works, in various rented theaters around mid-town, with stars and casts chosen as much for their drawing power as talent. It wasn't until some years later that it divided its attention between a permanent playhouse on Broadway and a freer, more experiment-oriented workshop on Bleeker Street called Circle-In-The-Square Downtown.

Other companies followed its example. If they didn't actually move locations, they at least began acting like big businesses: creating boards of directors from influential professional leadership in the community to benefit from their expertise. The directors, in turn, eventually spread a conservative blanket over the entire field that, to some practitioners who had welcomed the new freedom of expression, was suffocating. Instead of going along, they went underground, in a sense, making theater out of shared experiences in every imag-

inable locale other than the traditional ones, beginning with coffee houses. If most of the early fledgling attempts would not yet be said to be true alternatives to Off Broadway, they were certainly the grandparents of that wacky, wonderful breed of non-conformists who eventually created Off Off Broadway in the 1960s.

OFF OFF

The popularity the classics were experiencing Off Broadway encouraged some of the new young American playwrights to test their own possibilities there, and that heralded the second, or avant-garde, phase of the movement. The first new voice to be heard was that of Jack Gelber. His play *THE CONNECTION* opened on July 15, 1959, at the Living Theater and was destined to be called by many the original Off Off Broadway production.

Directed by Judith Malina with sets designed by her partner Julian Beck, it was the first play to treat the subject of heroin addiction in totally frank, brutally honest terms. By incorporating a clever play-within-a-play device, Gelber was able to exploit the deceptively passive behavior of the addict. At the outset, two characters, a writer and a producer, inform the audience that it is about to witness an evening of improvisational theater performed by a group of "addicts" assembled for that purpose. As the two become more and more involved with the stories the addicts tell, so does the audience, until the harrowing reality of their existence becomes nearly unbearable to watch. When I first saw it, I assumed that real addicts were participating, and that we were looking in on some kind of therapeutic group session. I even believed the young man who rose from his seat next to mine in the second act and spoke briefly was doing it spontaneously. It wasn't until my second visit that I became aware that actors were performing the roles of the addicts, and that the young man, although never listed as one of the performers, was named Martin Sheen, and would go on to have a distinguished career in the theater and films. It also became apparent the second time around that the pan-handlers who worked the intermission crowd for small change were also part of the act.

Malina and Beck loved to get the audiences involved in their productions, sometimes physically and to the point of intimidation. Disciples of the French playwright Antonin Artaud and his "Theatre of Cruelty," as well as admirers of Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theater" of Poland, began presenting conventional plays in their Village living room in 1947, then, gypsy fashion, occupied a succession of venues from the Cherry Lane Theater (briefly) to an uptown loft, then to another at Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue, where this play was presented.

Always just one step ahead of the law, they were eventually arrested in 1963 by Treasury agents for income and social security tax evasion, found guilty, and sentenced to short jail terms. When they were freed, they fled to France, where they remained for more than twenty years the darlings of European intelligentsia.

THE CONNECTION won two Obies in 1960 for Best Play and Best Production. It was also a very big box-office hit and ran for almost a year. Despite generally poor reviews from the uptown press, *The Village Voice*, the *Saturday Review*, and a few important critics like Kenneth Tynan, praised it glowingly. It became the thing to see among New York's middle class intellectuals—just the kind of audience Malina and Beck tried not to attract (their original objective was to present shows in the streets for the masses who would never set foot in a darkened theater).

In 1984, the Becks returned to New York for an engagement at the Joyce Theater on Eighth Avenue and 18th Street. It was an effort to rekindle the flame that made them shine so brightly in the 1960s, but the result was pathetic. Hostility from the critics and general apathy among theatergoers caused them to cancel the run. Their moment in the sun had passed. Julian died in September 1985, signaling a long creative hiatus for the company, as much from lack of public interest as personal loss.

Judith Malina continued valiantly to reestablish her group, however, and in 1990 was directing interesting, scaled-down productions from an outpost on 3rd Street in the East Village. In a lasting tribute to the Becks

and what they tried to do, I must say that every performance of theirs I ever sat through made me squirm so uneasily that my instincts were to get the hell out of there, but I never could.

Edward Albee emerged a year after Gelber with *THE ZOO STORY*, a one-act play that begins benignly enough on a bench in a park and ends in murder. This was his first play and was reportedly to have been written in three weeks. Albee was born in Washington, D.C., in 1928, and was adopted as an infant by Reed A. Albee, the head of the famous Keith-Albee chain of vaudeville and movie theaters. His aunt, Mrs. George Vigoreau, had a splendid home on Nantucket Island, where we both later summered, and I occasionally met him and his mother at art gallery openings there in the 1970s.

Albee was a master manipulator of words and a purveyor of nightmare plots. Sometimes called America's first "absurd" writer, his characters suffered from being unable (or unwilling) to either communicate or identify with each other. His most successful plays were those that dealt with family situations, such as *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF* (1962) (it was a local legend in the Village at the time that he found the title scrawled on a lavatory cubicle wall in a gay bar on Greenwich Avenue), and *A DELICATE BALANCE* (1966), which won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1967. His confrontational style and penchant for weird twists of plot influenced the next generation of young writers, until his star waned in the 1980s.

The patron saint of the movement was Joe Cino, who opened a coffee shop, the Caffé Cino, at 31 Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village in December 1958. Within a year, he was encouraging artists to display their paintings on the walls, and then invited poets to recite their work in informal gatherings. This led to readings of plays by actors who frequented the caffè, and finally to crude performances of one-act plays by burgeoning playwrights like Tom Eyen, Robert Patrick, John Guare, Robert Heide, Oliver Halley, Chris Nelson, Sally Ordway, Jeff Weiss, Lanford Wilson, and Sam Shepard. Some of the young actors who participated would later become celebrities in various forms of show business, most notably Bernadette Peters and David Christmas (in its most-celebrated production, *DAMES AT SEA, OR GOLDDIGGERS AFLOAT*, by George Haimsohn in 1966); Paxton Whitehead; Scott Glen; Harvey Keitel; Al Carmines; Helen Hanft; Shirley Stoler; and Al Pacino.

The playwrights were their own producers (and sometimes directors); the plays were staged with zero budgets, small casts, and props from the streets. A hat was ceremoniously passed around after each performance and the take was split among all participants. The generosity of the remunerations was subject to the number of observers there and the depth of their pockets; as time went on, early janglings gave way to the more reassuring muffled sounds of bills replacing coins, but none of it could ever have been considered fair compensation.

The Caffé Cino was one of my favorite haunts around 1960, and I watched it evolve from just another obscure storefront nonentity to a celebrated landmark that was included on the winter weekend pilgrimages of visiting college students. There were so many eager playwrights who wanted their work presented that Joe ultimately had to begin choosing among them and even went so far as to make out performing schedules, but he never read any of the plays. Like Ellen Stewart of La MaMa (as we shall see in a later chapter), he relied solely on instinct and the impressions he got from interviewing the writers. Through all that growth, however, he managed to retain the initial raw, impromptu ambience to the end.

The Caffé was about as nondescript a place outside as could be imagined; it had a standard neighborhood store facade—two large windows (with blown-up photos of current performers and playwrights tacked everywhere) flanking a green-black metal door icicled in rust from a leaky transom air conditioner, with the words Caffé Cino scrawled on it in lopsided graffiti. Inside, though, was a different matter. One half of the narrow room, lengthwise, was crammed with tiny round café tables encircled by metal ice cream parlor chairs; the other half housed a skinny platform raised on milk cartons just high enough to trip over when trying to get to the facilities out back, but too low to see anything of the actors from chest down on crowded nights, unless you were lucky enough to be granted front row seats (which came with their own set of built-in

hazards as performers needed to enter or exit the stage). It was an uncomfortable, crowded, smoky hovel, but also terrifically electric and exciting.

Joe stationed himself nightly behind the tall espresso machine at the back counter. On a trellis around and above him, and across the wall in the rear, were hung a thousand gaudy trinkets he'd acquired as keepsakes over many years as well as items given him by patrons, encrusting every inch of space like colorful barnacles. This was his office from which he dispensed coffee and advice before and after shows. He strictly refused to serve latecomers during performances, so many nights one could sit through an entire play with no refreshments; in fact, when the *caffé* caught on and was one of *the* places to visit, there were such crowds packed into it that getting from table to table was unthinkable for the waiters, and it was possible to have spent several hours there and seen a show or heard a poetry reading without having spent a nickel. Increasingly despondent after the death of his long-time partner, Cino committed suicide in 1967, and his *caffé* never recovered from the blow. Friends tried to keep it going for awhile, but without his unique spark, it sputtered out and was closed in 1968.

The Cino had chartered a new course, however, that others would follow. In 1960, a number of coffee house/theaters sprang up in the Village, notably Take 3, Phase 2, Café Manzini, and most especially Café La MaMa, in the basement of a building on Twelfth Street.

On September 27 of that year, KING UBU, a play by Alfred Jarry, opened at Take 3 on Bleecker Street and prompted later aficionados to claim it as the true beginning of Off Off Broadway, partly because of its length and serious intent. It was a far from perfect production. But that was the point of the new movement. Off Off Broadway allowed the artists to fail and recoup through trial and error at their own pace. Pleasing the audiences was the last of their concerns.

Except for La MaMa, none of the other coffee houses survived for more than a few years, but that also didn't matter. Their purpose, which was to jolt the theater back to its origins, had been fulfilled. Off Off Broadway was dedicated to writers. And now they were given the freedom to explore subjects that had been hitherto taboo, like homosexuality, and issues that were currently pertinent but not yet addressed satisfactorily elsewhere—the growing cancer that was Vietnam; the black civil rights uprising in the South; the numbing horror of John F. Kennedy's assassination; and the emergence of drugs and rock music as counter-culture antidotes to the stiflingly hypocritical middle class ethic they perceived all around them.

Language was loosened from its Victorian-laced straitjacket. Following the example of Lenny Bruce, the most popular stand-up comic of the time, whose four-letter word routines made him the darling of the young and the target of the fuzz and righteous right-wingers until his untimely death in the mid-1960s at the age of forty, playwrights began experimenting with obscenity as a metaphor for communication. One such attempt that I sat through in a Village café, but can't remember the title, was a one-act tour-de-force on the number of times the word "fuck" could be intelligently incorporated into the dialogue (the initial shock value lasted only a few minutes, followed by what seemed hours of tedium). This was heady stuff for a recently liberated generation, and the Off Off Broadway movement proliferated beyond the coffee houses to almost any locations that were dark and cheap, notably lofts and churches.

The progenitor of church/theaters was Al Carmines' Judson Poets' Theater, begun in 1961 after he had been made assistant pastor of the Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square. A musician and composer himself, he recognized at once the need for diverse venues for the emerging young theater artists, and also the necessity of revitalizing the stagnant condition of his church. He sponsored some of the most important early work there, especially musicals, presented in the nave along with dance pieces and short plays performed in the choir loft. No censorship was imposed on any of the material for religious or other reasons, so the subject range and methods of presentation were limitless. Carmines explained their possible detrimental effect on the life of the church thusly, "God can take care of Himself." As free-wheeling as his tenure was at the Judson, though, it was not looked on favorably from all quarters. In 1965, the American Baptist Confer-

ence almost expelled the church from its membership after a performance of Robert Morris's dance piece, *Waterman Switch*, during which he and dancer Yvonne Rainer floated across the stage in a very tight, very nude embrace. Among some of the other iconoclasts who changed the language of modern dance and who got their start there were David Gordon, Steve Paxton, and Carolee Schneemann.

In 1964, Rosalyn Drexler—a humorist, painter, lady wrestler, and all-around local character—put together an oddball revue called HOME MOVIES. Carmines wrote the music for it and appeared (somewhat self-consciously) as one of the characters, Father Shenanigan. The actor-comedian Orson Bean was so fascinated by it that he sponsored its Off Broadway move, directed by another Judson regular, Lawrence Kornfeld. Bean was a Washington Square denizen, who lived in the private mews off MacDougal Street between the park and 8th Street. His down-Maine, cracker barrel repartee masked a sharply intelligent, curious mind, and his interest in the local art scene was evident and sincere.

I was the art director of the Waverly Galleries on Washington Square then, at the corner of MacDougal and Waverly Place. I often tended the store for owner and friend, Mildred Milch, while she ran errands in the neighborhood. He would see me through the high basement window of the gallery and drop in occasionally; we had interesting conversations that ranged from the incipient drug scene over in the park to the sad state of education in America. (He eventually became so disillusioned that he gave up his acting career and home in the Village and moved to Europe for the sake of his children's education. But before he did, he bought a sculpture of mine he'd enjoyed looking at in the window, to take as a reminder of happier, friendlier days on the Square.)

Al Carmines also introduced the work of Ronald Tavel, with GORILLA QUEEN, a rollicking take-off on Hollywood jungle fantasies featuring a female ape-goddess and all kinds of sexual deviation among her male worshipers. Tavel had become known for his screenplays for Andy Warhol's underground film factory, most notably THE CHELSEA GIRLS, HEDY L., and VINYL. GORILLA QUEEN was transferred to the Martinique Theater in the spring of 1967 and was hailed as that season's most sensational experimental comedy.

Al Carmines also was composing and producing his own musicals as well, and several of them eventually were taken up Off Broadway and had successful runs. His musical version of Gertrude Stein's IN CIRCLES was remounted at the Cherry Lane Theater in 1968. PROMENADE, written with Maria Irene Fornes, a satire featuring two convicts and how they perceived the world, ran for 259 performances in 1969-1970, produced by Edgar Lansbury and Joseph Beruh. Also, my favorite Carmines' work, CHRISTMAS RAPPINGS, which was returned year after year at the holidays with basically the same cast, who aged and mellowed a little bit more each show, until, the last time it was done at Judson Memorial in the early 1980s, the predominant hair shade was pale grey. It told the story of the Nativity in song and dance, with styles ranging from doo-wop to country to operatic to Spanish flamenco. Carmines always accompanied and sang along at the piano, and it was so popular from word of mouth among Village people, that long lines formed early in the evenings outside the church, and there was often not even standing room.

Other churches opened their doors to theater companies. The Hardware Poets Theater, started in 1962 by Elaine and Jerry Bloedow, Audrey Davis, and Peter Levin, was welcomed at the Good Shepherd-Faith Presbyterian Church on West 66th Street near Lincoln Center. The second floor of the parish house at Saint Mark's-in-the-Bowery on Second Avenue became the home of Theater Genesis when its priest, the Reverend Michael Allen, thought it would be meaningful for the artistic community of the East Village to have a center to congregate at and perform in, and saw in it a way to revitalize his long-neglected church. He presented some of the important early work of playwrights Leonard Melfi, Sam Shepard, and Charles L. Mee, Jr., among others. Robert Kalfin and his Chelsea Theater Center started out in workshop space in St. Peter's Church on West 20th Street and later moved to the Church of the Holy Apostles on West 28th Street and Ninth Avenue. In 1964, the American Place Theater, under the Reverend Sidney Lanier and Wynn Handman, began life at St. Clement's Episcopal Church on West 46th Street, another nearly deserted sacred urban edifice.

But perhaps the best known Off Broadway impresario who got his start in a church, this time the basement of Emanuel Presbyterian on East 6th Street, was Joseph Papp. He presented free Shakespeare there in 1954, and in 1956, he convinced the New York Parks Department to let him continue the free performances at a seldom-used amphitheater over by the East River, out under the stars. Later he toured the five boroughs with Shakespeare, and finally came to roost in Central Park by the Belvedere Tower. In 1959, he bucked the then-powerful Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, who wanted no part of his theater, and won, not only being allowed to continue free Shakespeare in the park, but getting the City to build an outdoor theater there through the generosity of George Delacorte, the great open-air philanthropist. Joe Papp purchased the Astor Library, then a rambling pile of bricks on Lafayette Street, in 1966, and soon after got the City to declare it a landmark and buy it back from him, allowing him to rent it for one dollar a year to house the Shakespeare Festival. He called it the New York Public Theater, shortened now to the Public, and eventually carved out six theaters from its interior, and one tiny art film center.

Papp's Public Theater proved to be one of the most inventive and durable of the Off Broadway institutions. Always on the edge of insolvency, Papp managed to come up with money-making hits in the nick of time that could be readily transferred to Broadway to keep food on the table. Among his most notable were HAIR (1967-1968), and the phenomenal CHORUS LINE, that opened in 1975 and ran for a record fifteen years, spawning touring companies that were still kicking high all over the world in 1990.

By the mid 1960s, with Off Broadway secure in its comfortable relationship as the low-price mistress of Broadway, Off Off Broadway was again reexamining itself. A whole new movement was underfoot, one that was, as much as anything, a sign of its time. Distrust seemed to be the word that summed up young America's feelings, especially of the political arena, where even the president dealt in convoluted double-speak about the most horrible fiasco of the era, the Vietnam War. This led to distrust in language also, and Off Off Broadway was beginning to form two distinct camps—the verbal and the non-verbal approaches to making theater.



It was at this point, in early 1966, that I, now director of the Foundation, came upon the Off and Off Off Broadway scene in earnest. I had thrown myself at Broadway first as a point of reference. It was important to know first-hand what all the rebelling was against. I found out soon enough: Broadway was, and remains, a fantastic Fabergé Easter egg—beautiful to see, sensuous in form, it almost fools the viewer into believing that its expensive glittering package encases something more significant than a void. But, despite its apparent vapidness, I retained a great nostalgia for Broadway. I wouldn't have wanted it to be different. Shows like MAN OF LA MANCHA, MAME, and THE ROYAL HUNT FOR THE SUN, to mention only the tip of the season's iceberg, still evoke pleasant memories. Unlike some of my avant-garde-dealing colleagues, I never developed a cynical disdain for everything that happened around Times Square. I took it for what it was, and what it was was like nothing else in the universe.

For meaningful theater experiences, I looked increasingly to Off and Off Off Broadway; but, like on Broadway, there wasn't much to get stimulated about in the beginning months of the 1965-1966 season. Shows, big and small, opened and folded with clockwork regularity, leaving no traces behind. Titles like SWIM LOW LITTLE GOLDFISH, PLAY THAT ON YOUR OLD PIANO, KILL THE ONE-EYED MAN, BUGS AND VERONICA, LAUGHWIND, ROOMS, FITZ AND BISCUIT, BOHIKEE CREEK, BIG MAN, and MONOPOLY, all listed among the twenty-four new plays of the season, float right past my mind without a glimmer of recognition. Others fared better, like HAPPY ENDING and DAY OF ABSENCE, two slight works that signaled the debut of actor Douglas Turner Ward as a playwright of consequence. The first was a spoof on the ways domestic servants can clean up besides with a broom; the second, a broad satire on the dependency on black help to keep a southern town functioning. The white citizens discover one morning that all of the Negroes have vanished, leaving everyone in a state of paralysis.

THE WORLD OF RAY BRADBURY was a series of one-act plays by the noted science fiction writer. It was not the success it should have been, possibly because the science fiction device he used of projecting situations that are occurring presently into some future other-world setting doesn't lend itself as well to the stage as it does TV or the screen. In any event, it was a highly imaginative and provocative evening of chilling realities, in a handsome space-age set designed by Eldon Elder.

Café La MaMa made its official Off Broadway debut with two evenings of one-acters, brought intact from Ellen Stewart's experimental theater club on East 4th Street. It included works by Ray Bradbury, John White, Jerome Kass, Lanford Wilson, Stanley Mann, and Arkady Leokum, whose plays FRIENDS and ENEMIES, were about relationships of dominance, one of a timid waiter by his overbearing customer, and the other of a weak-willed teacher by his cruel student. Jean-Claude van Itallie was also represented in what was to become known as 6 FROM LA MAMA, and he would go on to have considerable success the next year with his own evening of one-acters under the title AMERICA HURRAH.

Lanford Wilson's entry, THE MADNESS OF LADY BRIGHT, was a study in hidden sexuality, in this case, homosexuality. In it, an aging gay man named Leslie Bright reminisces about the glory days of his youth and his many love affairs, and hints at his earliest relationships with his mother. Its companion piece, LUDLOW FAIR, plumbs the relationship of two women in trouble over the same man. The acting in both of these plays was certainly memorable—Cris Alexander as the simpering old queen, and Sasha von Scherler and Ann Wedgeworth as the two slighted ladies. They were short plays with a long potential. Lanford Wilson was to become one of the leading playwrights of his generation, and a winner of a Pulitzer Prize.

Sam Shepard came up with a new play at Theater Genesis at St. Marks-In-The-Bowery. It was titled THE ROCK GARDEN and explored the linguistic chasm that yawns between the generation of the two parents in the cast who discuss sex in veiled but provocative terms, and that of their son who treats the same subject forthrightly and in blunt, basic language. It was a study in hypocrisy versus honesty and was clobbered by the critics.

Off Off Broadway was still the realm of the one-act genre. Some of the companies, like La MaMa, were said to have done as many as thirty short plays in the season. It is a matter of record, for example, that Robert Kalfin at his Chelsea Theater Center, churned out twenty-five weekend productions in 1965-1966. Several foreign imports made their impact on Off Broadway that year. Two were by the same playwright who had not had anything done previously in the United States. His name, John Arden. The two plays, one presented in the middle of the season and one later, were LIVE LIKE PIGS, about a grubby family of slobs who move into a genteel public housing project, and SERJEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE, a slow, methodical piece set in Victorian England during the climax of which the "serjeant" returns from the colonial wars carrying a corpse to illustrate graphically to his smug neighbors the horror of it all.

Another British play, THE TRIGON, by James Broom Lynne, was directed and produced by Arthur Cantor, whose sensitive staging made it one of the best shows of the season. It was about two decadent young male roommates who pretend to have sincere interests in the same girl, only to be shocked into self-awareness of what they really are when a stranger entices her, right under their noses, into a relationship with him.

There were almost as many revivals as new works during the 1965-1966 season Off Broadway. Joe Papp was working on Shakespeare's LOVE'S LABOR'S LOST and CORIOLANUS. There was a stunning reprise of Michael Cacoyannis' staging of THE TROJAN WOMEN, corresponding to Robinson Jeffer's MEDEA. Theater 1965-1966 redid Beckett's KRAPP'S LAST TAPE and Albee's THE ZOO STORY, as well as a very interesting dual presentation in French one evening, starring Madeleine Renaud, then in English the next, with Ruth White, of Beckett's HAPPY DAYS. Racine's PHEDRE was presented in a new English translation by William Packard; and James Yaffe adapted a Duerrenmatt novel, THE DEADLY GAME, into a play.

It was discovered early that revues fared as well Off Off Broadway as one-act plays did. There were two outstanding examples to be seen that season. One, RETURN OF SECOND CITY, was another manifestation of

the genius of this group from Chicago, especially at improvisation. (With alumni like Elaine May and Mike Nichols, they continued to train and develop interesting new talent and material a quarter century later.) The other was THE MAD SHOW, a musical based on the popular *Mad Magazine* sketches, assembled by Steve Vinaver. As would be expected from this background source, it was zaniness to the point of frenzy. Some of it was sophomoric and predictable. But what was not predictable, and a welcomed delight, was the score by Mary Rodgers that soared along right over the sick jokes and obvious punch lines with delightful originality. The show was made up of comic-strip characters, most of them played by a small, overworked group of actors whose youthful talents shone like beacons. The other comic-strip characters were painted cutouts that were stationed about the stage. One was Little Orphan Annie, whose faithful dog Sandy started things off in this chapter with an ARF! ARF! that finally got translated successfully to OFF! OFF!

Chapter Three

A Place In The Sun

1965-1966

Theatrical performances in churches seemed like a new and radical idea in 1960. But in fact, it was a practice that was centuries old. In medieval times, the Catholic church incorporated pagan festivals into its calendar to help consolidate its influence across northern Europe and celebrated them with great theatrical ritual. By the tenth century, they had developed into liturgical dramas. Even the Mass itself became a dramatic event. The elevation of the host accompanied by bell ringing is, as pointed out in the first chapter, one of the most magical transitions of the mind, very like the opening moments of a play when reality is suspended and faith/fantasy prevails. The processions at Palm Sunday depicted events in the last week of Christ's life on earth in realistic, play-like continuity. Easter combined the resurrection of Christ and a pre-Christian celebration of the goddess Eostre (Old English name for a Teutonic deity), who ruled spring and fertility, into a great festival of renewal. My own favorite traditional Holy Week service has always been the Wednesday night observance of *Tenebrae* (Latin for "darkness"), when lengthy matins and lauds are sung alternately by choir and acolytes in various locations, to hauntingly beautiful music so old and obscure that no one knows quite when or by whom it was written. As the singing progresses, candles are extinguished, one by one, on a large candelabrum, symbolizing the ebbing away of the Saviour's worldly existence. When the last one is snuffed out, the sanctuary is left in total darkness. The congregation kneels in silence for a long period. Then a startling bang, made in a distant chamber (often by clapping two wooden boxes together), breaks the stillness, and a solitary lit taper is returned to its holder by the altar as a sign of vigilance. It casts long, portentous shadows as the worshipers wordlessly make their way out of the church.

About the year 925, an anonymous, three-line phrase, called a *trope*, was interpolated into the authorized medieval Mass. It contained a discourse between the angels and the three Marys at the tomb, and is widely considered to be the very first example of liturgical drama. By the end of that century, directions for performing it were published, along with suggested costumes.

The Protestant Reformation successfully eliminated most religious drama by the mid-sixteenth century, but by then a bold new form of secular drama had emerged outside the church. It reintroduced some of the comedic and bizarre elements of earlier Greek and Roman theater, and its stagings were becoming more complicated and specialized, giving rise to the need for trained professional actors and technicians to replace the ardent but limited bands of amateur volunteers who performed the simple liturgical plays. The seeds were being sown for the phenomenal growth of theater in the next century.

One of the most successful reunions of church and theater occurred in New York in 1962 at St. Clement's Church, where Wynn Hardman and the Reverend Sidney Lanier together founded The American Place Theatre, demonstrating that what was *new* in sacred/secular mergers was that *non*-religious drama was being introduced into churches and performed without apparent censorship or restrictions of subject matter or the manner in which it was presented.

Lanier, an ordained Episcopal priest then associated with St. Thomas' Church on Fifth Avenue, had become increasingly dissatisfied with his church's ultra-conservative nature and was seeking ways to expand the horizons of his ministry to include his other interests. One of them was the theater, which seemed to run naturally in his family—his first cousin was Tennessee (Thomas Lanier) Williams—and when he arrived in New York from Mississippi, he became an avid playgoer. He was seeking a way to blend the arts and religion into a mutually supportive confederation.

In his wanderings about Manhattan in search of a possible site for his experiment, he came upon St. Clem-

ent's almost by accident, as he told it, not even knowing it was of his faith until he went inside. It was a dingy pile of bricks several blocks west of the glitter of Broadway, on the north side of 46th Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues in a neighborhood once known as Hell's Kitchen, but long since devoid of any such swashbuckling description. When he entered past the bright red outer door, he felt immediately that he had found it.

It was a moribund mission, open only for weekend services performed by a visiting semi-retired clergyman for only a dozen or so elderly parishioners—all that was left of a congregation. Lanier was an anomaly among his peers: brusque, cigar-chomping, earthy, business-like, and very persuasive. He approached the then-Bishop Coadjutor of the Diocese of New York, Horace W. B. Donegan, to ask that St. Clement's be converted into an experimental parish under his leadership, knowing full well by that time that some church officials had already recommended closing its doors permanently. His wish, in true fairy-tale fashion, was granted, and he soon had the church open and operating full-time.

He then joined forces with the director Wynn Handman, actor Michael Tolan, and playwright William Goyen, who had been toying for over a year or more with the idea of forming a new kind of theater dedicated to the writer, with higher standards than were evident then on Broadway, but with a realistic-enough business approach to make it viable. Their main problem had been finding a suitable space that was also affordable, and until now, they had been unsuccessful.

Wynn Handman was the driving artistic force in this small band of zealots. He was discharged from the service in 1950 and enrolled in acting classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse. He was Sanford Meisner's assistant until 1955, when he began to teach professional acting classes in his own one-room studio. He also directed summer stock, Off Broadway productions, and worked with the directors' and writers' units at the Actors Studio. His living was made, however, directing vanity stage productions for well-known movie personalities to make personal appearances in around the country. The latest of these had starred Myrna Loy and Claude Dauphin. When they learned of his plans for a new theater venture, they were enthusiastic and became his first supporters.

Among theater practitioners in the mid-1960s, even in the nonprofit sector, Handman stood out as a "cerebral" type: he was an avid reader with universal interests and an encyclopedic retention of whole pages of literature that left him never at a loss for an apt phrase to punctuate a situation or help make a point, be it from the early classics, George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, or Donald Barthelme. He was convinced that there was more that could be offered in terms of playwrighting than was currently evident, and wanted to prove it.

His ideas took concrete form after he attended a lecture given by George Devine, the founder of the English Stage Company, which was the center for the creative resurgence of new drama in post-war London. Devine had made two important points. One was that there was no reason that there should be a separation of dramatic literature from the rest of literature. It was all one, interdependent. He gave the example of the French writers Camus and Sartre who wrote equally for the stage as well as hard covers because they felt they had something to say in both mediums. His second point was even more inspirational. He admonished his listeners not to seek out only geniuses—they would take care of themselves.

"We are not geniuses," he said, "we are working people of the theater, and it is up to us to create conditions in which these things we believe in our hearts will take place. If you want an alive theater, you will get it. But you will have to pay for it."

Handman was also heavily influenced by Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), the American photographer, editor, and art gallery director. Among the artists sponsored by his gallery were Georgia O'Keeffe (they married in 1924), Marsden Hartley, and the watercolorist John Marin. His theories on light, form, and movement were the basis for Wynn's early stagings. Stieglitz had named his second gallery An American Place. To honor his mentor, Handman took the name for his theater, changing An to The.

The aims of the founders of The American Place were three-fold: to set up a workshop for developing new talents; to be able to mount many different kinds of performances—from simple readings to in-progress works (fully rehearsed but without sets or costumes); and to present full professional productions that might be picked up by Broadway or Off Broadway producers for possible commercial runs.

The sticking point was—how to get an audience? From the first, Handman wanted it to be entirely by subscription. That way, he argued, they would have a firm, permanent base to build from, and a stable audience to shape work for. Lanier disagreed. He felt the only way to create stimulating theater was by attracting new patrons continuously, and that could only be done by box-office sales. Initially, Handman prevailed. Under his management, access to their productions was by subscription only. The numbers of new subscribers climbed steadily until it reached ten thousand in 1976. But then they began to fall off drastically, due as much as anything to a change in playgoers' habits, a change that was to affect the entire industry. People began wanting to pick and choose what they saw on the spur of the moment instead of months (or years) in advance. And so, fifteen years later, long after Lanier had quit and gone to California and Handman had moved The American Place Theatre out of St. Clement's, Lanier's idea was adopted to bolster sagging subscription sales. A box office was installed and tickets were subsequently sold to anyone for any event desired.

Sidney Lanier's original plan had been to incorporate the theater activities with those of the church in such a way that, as an early brochure he had printed stated, the parish would "look out from the church to the world of the arts...attempting to minister to its people, to encourage promising ideas and projects, and to support authenticity from whatever source it may arise." He told Handman, "What you want to do in the theater, I want to do in my church." St. Clement's would become a mission to The American Place.

Among their early attempts at integration were the inclusions of dramatic episodes into the services that were designed to help illustrate the gospel readings or amplify views on the topics dealt with in the sermons. Some of these Mass Interludes, as they became known, proved to be very moving experiences. One such was the commemoration of the recent death of James Agee. Excerpts from his book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* were read by the playwright William Goyen (one of the founders, whose plays were the first American Place produced). Then Father Flye, who had ministered for many years to the Greenwich Village community at the Chapel of St. Luke's-In-The-Field on Hudson Street, and to whom Agee addressed epistles that were later collected into another best-selling book, *Letters to Father Flye*, rose from his place at mid-congregation to say a few words, as he had been invited to do, and ended up talking for a spellbinding hour. Elderly and ill, he was so frail he had to grasp the pew in front of him for support. But he clung there tenaciously, like the fluff of a milkweed pod in the wind, charming his listeners, many of whom had to strain to catch what he said, with vivid portrait sketches of his beloved friend. Exhausted and emotionally drained, he finally eased back into his seat with hands clasped and head down. Tearful silence prevailed for long minutes, no one daring, or wanting, to break the spell.

Not all of the Interludes were as meaningful and touching as that one, but a few of them would be equally memorable for other reasons. One Sunday morning, it was planned to recognize the black civil rights movement, then emerging in the South, in a tribute to its slain leader Martin Luther King. There had been a newspaper account of a man in a small town in Pennsylvania who had written a black-rights manifesto. The newsworthy part of this was that the man was white, and until then, unknown. He tried to get the local newspaper and radio station to publish it for all to read and hear. They refused. In frustration, he rented an empty downtown store for a day and advertised that he would read it there himself to anyone who was brave enough or cared enough to show up. On the appointed day, he waited inside the store for several hours in vain. No one entered the premises. But out on the street, an angry crowd of white townspeople was congregating and began to march back and forth in front of his window with handmade placards denouncing him. They hurled epithets and debris as they passed. He stood his ground silently, stubbornly.

Then suddenly, a plainly dressed elderly black woman emerged from their midst, entered the store, and

took a seat at the very end of the last row of benches that had been neatly set out. She said nothing and stared straight ahead. The mob pressed against the glass with raised fists. The man read his manifesto slowly and clearly. When he finished, the old woman rose, quietly thanked him, nodded, and left. The crowd outside parted just enough to let her pass through it without anyone touching her. She seemed oblivious to the threats being shouted at her. The man locked up and left by the back door.

The dramatic possibilities of the scene so impressed Handman and Lanier that they decided to try to reenact it as part of the service. Wynn ran back and forth on 46th Street searching for a suitable black woman to fill the role. But, being Sunday morning, there wasn't a soul out there, not even the habitual winos and rag-pickers sleeping in doorways. He next scoured 45th Street, then 47th, with no better luck. Nearing Mass time and still without the important character for the scene, he returned to the church and had to settle at the last minute for a lithe, young black parishioner, elegantly dressed in a very short skirt and smart hat, who volunteered for the role.

Michael Tolan began reading the manifesto with great feeling. The black beauty entered and solemnly lowered herself onto the end of a bench, as instructed. Throughout the reading, she crossed and uncrossed her long legs, and cupped her dazzling smile in one lace-gloved hand as she twiddled a pair of movie-star sunglasses with the other. The effect was hilariously inappropriate and left Handman and Lanier wringing their hands and rolling their eyes heavenward at the back of the congregation.

Occasionally a Mass Interlude caught the fervor of the message and the theatricality of the Moment in one grand stroke of unrehearsed harmony. One of the most memorable was the Sunday when a portion of Ibsen's dramatic poem "Brand" was enacted. Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was born and raised in Norway, but after an unsuccessful early career writing historical verse plays, he traveled to Rome on a grant from his government and lived abroad for the next twenty-six years, partly from dissatisfaction with his country's political policies. Norway had for centuries been under the domination of either Sweden or Denmark, but with the great surge of nationalism that swept Europe after 1848, there was a movement underway for Norwegian independence. In 1864, when the Germans successfully invaded Denmark, the Norwegians refused to aid their fellow Scandinavians with troops or arms. Traveling through Germany on his way to Rome, Ibsen witnessed the Germans gloating over their victory and felt disgust and contempt for his unsupported homeland. "It was then that 'Brand' grew inside me like a fetus," he explained. He wrote it first as a poem, then as a drama in 1865; its publication brought him immediate acclaim.

The action of the play takes place in and near a fjord township on the country's west coast. Brand, a puritanical Protestant minister who has left his parish church in the valley out of discontent over his people's slackening faith, climbs the nearby mountain to what he calls his "ice church." His wife and small child accompany him. The child subsequently becomes gravely ill and is at the point of dying. In desperation, Brand falls to his knees in the snow, with face and arms raised heavenward in agonized supplication, delivering one of the most moving soliloquies in theater literature, incorporating two of Ibsen's favorite themes—the purpose of existence and the struggles of the will. Although the character of Brand was drawn from several models, it was clear that it also represented Ibsen's own hatred of compromise: "Brand is myself at my best moments." But to Scandinavians, it was primarily a political play—a searing indictment of the spiritually lax Norwegian nation in microcosm.

St. Clement's was still set up as a functioning church at the time (it was later gutted and redesigned as primarily a theater), with conventional altar, altar rail, and pews with a central aisle. On both side walls were high, pointed stained glass windows (later covered by solid blinds). The soliloquy in the mountain "ice church" was the scene chosen for that morning's Interlude. Actor Richard Tatro, as Brand, approached the rail from the aisle, knelt down, and launched into the speech in great stentorian tones. The morning had been grey and threatening until then, and the whole atmosphere inside the sanctuary one of heavy gloom. But, as if by some divine cue, when Tatro got to the line, "God give me some light! God give me some light!", a

brilliant shaft of sunlight pierced the windows and caught him in a spectacular Technicolor pool so effective that, as a parishioner later suggested, it would have made Cecil B. deMille turn green with envy.

The effect was immediate. The congregation gasped. The organist pulled out all the stops. And, ecstatically inspired, Father Lanier and his sole acolyte, who had been waiting at the back of the church to begin their procession to the altar, caught the drama of the moment and sashayed grandly down the aisle, with vestments swaying and the incense thurible swinging in wide arcs, sending out plumes of smoke so thick and pungent, the sinuses of the entire congregation were cleared in one big corporate sneeze. (Martha Coigney, the director of International Theatre Institute of U.S., said of Lanier in that period, "Sidney loved to 'dress up' and prance about, not so much to show off as just for the sheer fun of it—like a kid in the attic, playing fantasy games.")

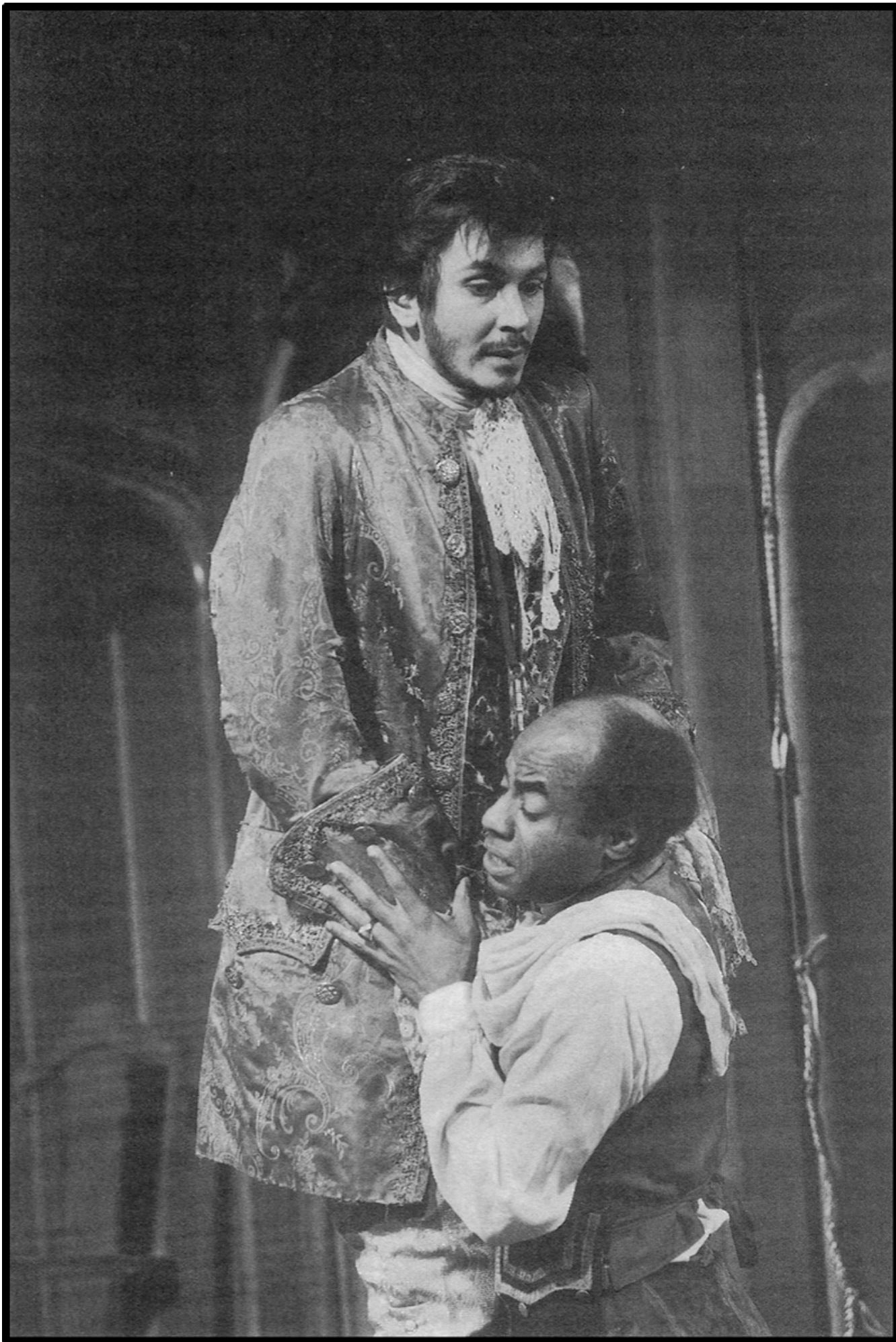
Lamer left St. Clement's (and the priesthood) not long after that, and Wynn Handman moved The American Place to its own theater space in 1971. But Lanier's successor, the Reverend Eugene Monick, continued the church/theater relationship, and most especially, the Sunday service "Interludes," occasionally taking them to new and often bizarre heights. One, titled SUNDAY MORNING IMPROVISATION, was performed by Joe Chaikin's Open Theater group. The actors arranged themselves across the front of the church, facing the worshipers in the pews as a kind of "mirror image congregation." They sang the first verse of a hymn straight, from hymnals held out in front of them. On the second verse, however, one by one they let their books fall to the floor, sounding like gunshots in an echo chamber. As the organist continued playing the hymn, the performers dropped their hands to their sides and slowly turned to examine each other, first with their eyes, then by prodding each other's body with fingers and feet. Before long, this developed into a veritable orgy of tactile explorations. The sensual mood and madness spilled over into the coffee hour, as the group moved among the parishioners, snorting and sniffing one another on all fours like so many barnyard animals in heat. The parishioners were at a loss to understand what it all had to do with the day's lessons but found the goings-on highly amusing.

Such unrestricted license regarding material and presentation was granted by most of the (predominantly Episcopal) churches that harbored theatrical companies in the 1960s, even when the work proved pointedly anti-clerical. It was this attitude that made the difference between what was going on then and medieval counterparts. Only a few rectors had second thoughts later, and that was when the theater operations threatened to overwhelm the delicate balance. Playwright Leonard Melfi, describing the openness of attitude at St. Mark's-In-The-Bowery, where Theater Four began and where his early work was presented and developed, for example, said, "I've never felt so free in my life...I have a theory, you know, that sexual fantasies are a necessary opiate of the people, so to speak, and most of my plays are sexual fantasies. But the church plays them without a whimper."

The interior of St. Clement's, with its handsomely shaped vaulted ceiling and exposed wooden cross-beams, was more church than theater when my friend Kate first took me there in 1963 for a series of staged readings. But already, movable banks of seats had been introduced so that the central area could be adapted to almost any type of production, and black draperies hung at both sides near the back to form a kind of proscenium with wings for works requiring conventional staging. (In time, more sophisticated seating was designed with permanent stepped platforms and upholstered backs.)

Wynn Handman struck theatrical gold with his first full-length production in the 1964-1965 season: an evening of three one-act plays (later shortened to two) under the title, THE OLD GLORY, by the Pulitzer Prize winning poet Robert Lowell. This was his first produced play, having won praise the previous year when The American Place presented a bare-stage reading of it. The first two plays were based on short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864): MY KINSMAN and MAJOR MOLINEAUX. The third was taken from BENITO CERENO by Herman Melville. (Interestingly enough, Melville left his native New York City in 1846 and settled in Salem, Massachusetts, where he became a neighbor and then intimate friend of Hawthorne.)

The long verse play had been given to Handman to read in 1962 by an agent, who told him at the time that



THE OLD GLORY (1964-65) By Robert Lowell
American Place Theatre
Frank Langella Roscoe Lee Browne

Photo by Martha Holmes

she thought it would be perfect for his new theater. But, she added, he could probably never get it because there were so many other theaters that would be vying for it first. Handman subsequently met Lowell occasionally at social functions, and Lowell always brought up the subject of *THE OLD GLORY*, not knowing that Handman had already read it. About a year passed and Wynn saw the agent again, who now told him that everyone had rejected the project so far, even Lincoln Center. He couldn't resist asking for it. Such a formidable package hardly ever dropped in the lap of a new director for his first production—three plays by one of America's foremost poets, a cast of over fifty, and four-and-a-half hours of intelligent theater.

Lowell was invited to take a look at St. Clement's for himself. Handman and Tolan showed him the performance space, then led him up the narrow flight of steps to the third-floor aerie that held the company's tiny offices, the ones whose dormers looked out from the side of the roof. He became fascinated with the intense young men and women he observed busy-beeing about the business of a small theater company. They even seemed to communicate in their own cryptic language, he noted, like some exotic tribe, which, of course, they were. The cozy domesticity of the premises even included a pregnant cat.

Intermittently discussing poetry and literature with him as they led him back down to the main floor, Handman and Tolan finally worked up enough courage to ask him, point-blank, if they could do *THE OLD GLORY*.

He looked about him again and asked, "You mean do it right here, in this room, with you?"

Of course, they replied, and he seemed to sigh in relief. His play had finally found a home that was suitable for it. He gave his permission then and there, and later said he never once regretted it. He wrote that *The American Place* gave him "a director, actors, and a setting that were not only all I could have wished for, but more than I could have imagined—an unforeseen rightness."

All three stories were based on history, the first two set in Boston just before the American Revolution. But the most critically acclaimed was the last one, *BENITO CERENO*, from Melville's novella. It is a searing indictment of white America's historically condescending attitudes toward people of color, especially the black race, and, conversely, the Negro's arrogant refusal to compromise. The action takes place on a Spanish slave ship in 1800 where a black African chieftain instigates an insurrection that has to be repressed by the ship's Yankee captain. Roscoe Lee Browne played the chieftain with almost frightening strength and anger, and Frank Langella nuanced the role of the captain with all the emotional and self-doubting undercurrents that surged through Melville's tale.

The success of the play was immediate. It ran its course at *The American Place* and was transferred for a longer run to an Off Broadway theater. It won for Robert Lowell a Drama Desk-Vernon Rice Award for Off Broadway achievement. And, perhaps most significantly, it gave *The American Place Theatre* an instant prominence that would ordinarily take years to attain: such, in fact, that it caught the attention of the Ford Foundation which awarded it a two-hundred-twenty-five-thousand dollar grant for the development of new scripts.

Riding the crest, Handman confidently presented the second production of the season, another fully staged play, this time by a new young playwright, Ronald Ribman, called *HARRY, NOON, AND NIGHT*. It too was a hit and went into an Off Broadway venue after closing at St. Clement's. Its success was partly due, Handman, Tolan, and Lanier agreed, to the then new policy of allowing critics to attend the plays before opening nights to give them time to consider them and possibly write more thoughtful reviews. The innovation paid off and prompted other theater groups to follow their example.

In his first prospectus, put together at the end of the 1964-1965 season, Handman, always ready with an appropriate tag line, quoted Garcia Lorca about theater being the barometer that records a nation's greatness or decline, "A theater which in every branch, from tragedy to vaudeville, is sensitive and well-oriented, can in a few years change the sensibility of a people, and a broken-down theater, where wings have given way to

cloven hoofs, can coarsen and benumb a whole nation." Obviously The American Place was determined that American theater take flight.

During the 1963-1964 season, Kate and I had seen a skeletal staging of *THE OLD GLORY* that, even in rough early form, was hailed with enthusiasm. She apparently was acquainted with Sidney Lanier's wife (at the time) and that may have been the impetus for her helping out the young company financially, but it was surely the content and approach to the works that kept her interested and led to her increased involvement. She organized a series of cocktail parties for potential benefactors at her Beekman Place apartment, and it was there I first met Lanier and Wynn Handman. And Tennessee Williams. Sidney brought his cousin along to one of them as a willing inducement, and it worked magic with the guests. I was thrilled to be in his presence; Williams' plays spoke to me in the special way that only one other man's works would equal a generation later—Stephen Sondheim. I had a vague portrait of him in mind from newspaper photos and articles and rather expected he'd be a kind of Faulkneresque, rumpled-southern-college-professor type and was pleasantly surprised by his flamboyant theatricality. It was a warm afternoon and, in contrast to the prevalent navy blazers and grey suits on other male guests, he wore a chocolate brown one-piece belted jumpsuit with a buttery bisquit-colored sports jacket over his shoulders like a cape; around his neck was a bright silk scarf tied like an ascot and tucked neatly inside the open-throated shirt front.

From a distance, he brought to mind a dashing 1930s movie star with ubiquitous tan and small dark moustache; closer, his face resembled a discarded Ronald Coleman publicity shot retrieved from a back lot puddle and already turning to pulp; his eyes—world-weary, funny-sad clown eyes—told ancient tales of too many trips around the block, too many nights that should have been days. He seemed like a helpless puppy begging for a pat at the moment, but I remembered Robert Rice's summation of Williams' enigmatic, complex character in a 1958 *New York Post* profile:

"He is undoubtedly one of the most trusting, suspicious, generous, egocentric, helpless, self-reliant, fearful, courageous, absent-minded, observant, modest, vain, withdrawn, gregarious, puritanical, Bohemian, angry, mild, unsure, self-confident men in the U.S."

Tennessee Williams later referred to the 1960s as his "Stoned Age," and the press at the time seemed to almost gleefully corroborate it with endless exposés on the decline and fall of our most celebrated playwright into our most notorious souse. At the time of Kate's reception, he was reported to be in a depressed state over the negative response to his latest play, *THE MILK TRAIN DOESN'T STOP HERE ANYMORE*, which opened on Broadway in January 1963, but he didn't show it. In fact, he was in infectious good spirits, smiling broadly and obviously relishing the attention lavished on him. He was downright garrulous at times, and his voice, more than anything else, made the most lasting impression. It was deep and soft and the whole state of Mississippi wafted through it. There was an undercurrent of humor as well, punctuated by bursts of dirty, self-deprecating laughter. As a young dancer nearby put it, "He could've been an actor. I mean a good actor."

At one point, I mentioned looking for some place to get away to occasionally—a remote retreat in which to quietly vegetate and allow wounds inflicted by the city's intense, highly competitive art scene to heal. He screwed up one eye like a movie pirate and out of the corner of his mouth said, "Go west, young man. KEY West!" referring to that last giant footstep off southern Florida, splashed by the Atlantic on one side, by the Gulf of Mexico on the other, and with toes pointed toward the Caribbean. He'd been going there since 1947, he said, "to retreat from the damned 'wherewithal' of Show Biz/" I was soon to take his advice.

My approach to The American Place Theatre was an entirely different one than a year before as the 1965-1966 season got under way in October. Instead of "going along for the ride" as Kate's guest, I was now responsible for the Foundation set up in her name and expected to make creative evaluations. Since this was the only theater group I knew she had an interest in (the others were dance- or film-oriented) and I had some understanding of its inner workings, it occurred to me during our Foundation meeting that this might be the one we should give our first grant to, but I wanted to see more work there before deciding. *THE OLD*

GLORY was certainly an auspicious start for the previous season, and as it turned out, Wynn Handman had chosen a work to open this one that would repeat its success (and in the process prematurely confer on him the mythical title of the theater's new knight errant blessed with the Midas touch).

The second success was William Alfred's HOGAN'S GOAT. Robert Lowell had been responsible for introducing Alfred to Handman, and this recognition of the confidence and trust that The American Place was trying to create in its writers pleased Wynn as much as the favorable reviews. Alfred was a Harvard professor with a bent for Greek tragedy. He wrote in a style described as poetic realism and had fashioned this play after tales his grandmother told him about Irish immigrants in New York in the nineteenth century.

Matthew Stanton, an Irish immigrant living in Brooklyn, is the main character. At one time he'd been the paramour of Agnes Hogan, a feisty wench who dies at the beginning of the play, and he had been called, derisively, Hogan's goat by neighbors, which irritated the hell out of him. He is now married to a shy, sensitive young woman who is overwhelmed by the rough politics that Stanton is involved in and by the guilt of having been married secretly outside the Church. She withdraws further into herself as he publicly campaigns to overthrow the incumbent mayor of Brooklyn, a sly old professional crook who knows all the tricks of getting reelected. In the process, the Stantons' dark secret is discovered, and they fall victims of the Church's wrath and the voters' rejection. In true tragic fashion, Stanton's life is ruined: by his past, by his irascibility, and by his all-consuming aspirations.

A verse play like THE OLD GLORY, its poetry is more convincing as spoken dialogue and more redolent of its roots. William Alfred opined that if it hadn't been for Handman and The Place, he might have spent the rest of his life sitting on his play, too chicken to work up enough courage to pursue its presentation elsewhere. "I don't like to be mean," he said, "but these other people say such silly things to you."

The production was beautifully mounted and the cast was superb. Ralph Waite played Stanton with all the fervor of a sprinter who finds himself at the edge of a cliff and can't stop running. Tom Ahearne was so convincing as the Mayor that he made one feel that deviousness and dishonesty were the only attributes needed for running city government successfully; and in the role of the ill-suited wife, a tall, rather exotic-looking young actress was introduced who would in time become one of filmdom's brightest and most singular stars: Faye Dunaway.

HOGAN'S GOAT went the way of its predecessor: after its planned run at The American Place, it was transferred to an Off Broadway theater to make way for the rest of the season's subscription program. Next was an amusing treatise on facing up to responsibilities titled JONAH, casting the Biblical character as the main protagonist with a strong Yiddish accent. It was written by Paul Goodman, a fellow Villager who lived in a lovely old house on 10th Street between Sixth and Fifth Avenues, and whose main claim to fame until then was a best-selling book he wrote, *Growing Up Absurd*. He was also well-known to Village Voice readers, as a teacher and local rights activist.

During the run of JONAH, I experienced a recurrence of a chronic bronchial condition severe enough for my doctor to prescribe a warmer climate for a spell. I took Tennessee Williams' tongue-in-cheek advice—"Go west, young man. Key West!"—and traveled to that tropical outpost where I found time hadn't so much stopped as didn't exist. It soon wrapped itself around me like one of the garish beach towels hawked along its main drag, Duval Street. I also found that it was fortunate that I'd met Williams, for in most circles there, it was tantamount to social acceptance. Everywhere the cognoscenti walked around with invisible badges reading ME and TENNESSEE.

Williams, of course, lived in Key West off and on then and was spotted often about town. It was said he enjoyed being recognized on the street, during a period in his life when he could use any encouragement or adulation. Having had him for dinner was enough to memorialize on a bronze plaque beside the front door; an invitation to his house led to instant celebrity. Some who socialized with him frequently, like my friend Emily Goddard—who once sang with Toscanini in the NBC Symphony Orchestra chorus and—don't-

you-forget-it!, and was the self-proclaimed doyenne of the local culture scene—would have you believe they practically raised him from infancy, or at the very least, were surrogate nannies, delivering him intact to his little gazebo-ed compound on Duncan Street and tucking him in after he'd overdone it (again) at one of their soirees.

In the course of the several months I spent recuperating there, I joined a daily archaeological dig at the site of an early nineteenth century town dump by the edge of the sea near the west Martello Tower. It was an early-morning casual thing, anyone could join, and we unearthed mostly broken shards of pottery, early clay pipes, and a prodigious array of liquor bottles, turned a magnificent amethyst tint from years of sea, sun, and salt. The very number of these artifacts that were discovered every time we dug into the pebbly sand was testimony to the legend that Key West had been a hard-drinking town from the first. Some of the bottles had real value. A couple of squarish green Hollander gins fetched me a hundred dollars each at a local antique shop. A young, strapping sailor from the Navy base showed up almost every morning with a shovel and burlap sack. When he learned that I was somehow connected with show business and had met Tennessee Williams, even he made a point of telling me that they were great buddies and had gone swimming together, an apparent local honor. (Williams made a daily ritual of strolling the half-dozen blocks from his house to the ocean for a dip surrounded by an entourage of current favorites, until he had a pool installed near the gazebo.) So many people brought up his name, in fact, or boasted of having recently been in his company, wet or dry, that I was fast getting the impression I must be the only person who hadn't had some connection with him that winter in Key West. (I made up for it by eventually taking tea with him beside the new pool in his yard during one of his less "wet" periods.)

Not that he wouldn't have enjoyed the style in which I could have entertained him. It was right out of *THE NIGHT OF THE IGUANA*. I lived in a charming little cubicle at the end of a long cinder block edifice called the Rose Crest Motel: fall out of bed onto the beach. Forty-five bucks a week with one linen change, and all the cockroaches you could squash. The decor was Early Autumn—walls the color of dead oak leaves, pumpkin plastic scoop chairs, dirt-brown shag rug (stray hairpins permanently embedded), and a tubular chrome table topped with drifts of russet and ochre leaves in a sea of formica.

There was even a "Madam Rose," who rocked all day in a green metal shell by the front desk: legs like boiled dinners bursting from shark skin shorts, and iridescent toenails escaping in all directions from rubber flip-flops. When the subject was broached (as it often was), she'd vehemently insist that those were NOT cockroaches in the rooms, but water bugs, dearie. And what could you expect, so close to the ocean and all? Then she'd resume rocking and dragging on an ever present menthol fag, and snicker at the hapless pink tourists trying to navigate the scorching tarmac outside in bare feet like cats on a hot tin roof.

She, too, knew Tennessee, you see. One morning while we exchanged stories of her connection with him and mine with his cousin, the mail arrived, and in it a letter to me from Wynn Handman. He wrote of his eagerness to mount another Ronald Ribman play (he had written *HARRY, NOON, AND NIGHT*) and suggested this might be the moment to consider awarding our first grant—to him, for it. I pondered (napped) on it all afternoon in the shade of a clattering coconut palm and decided he was right. It was time to get the Foundation's feet wet. I contacted the other members of our Board and they concurred. Within a fortnight, Handman had a check and we were in show business. (Note: respecting Foundation policy not to publicly divulge dollar amounts of donations, they will be omitted in this book. It can be assumed, however, that generally they averaged under ten-thousand dollars per project, depending on scope and importance.)

I had a double Williams connection of my own now to boast of whenever the subject arose in Key West: it was he who introduced me to the place, and it was he who persuaded me to support his cousin's theatrical venture. So, in a manner of speaking, I, too, had been "swimming" with Tennessee.

I returned in time for the opening night performance and was told I must stay for the party after to "meet everybody." Audiences at first performances, I later discovered, are notoriously over-eager, over-supportive,

and applaud everything. If you were to judge performances by them, there would be only hit shows with superlative casts. This production, however, proved to be worthy of all the attention and deserved loud applause that continued long after the actors left the stage from their one obligatory curtain call.

Ronald Ribman had surpassed his own high standard of writing, evidenced the previous season, with this sensitive and deeply touching play. Entitled *THE JOURNEY OF THE FIFTH HORSE*, it was loosely based on a short story called *Diary of a Superfluous Man* by the Russian novelist and short-story writer Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883), born in Orel and educated in St. Petersburg, who continued his studies in Berlin, Germany, and returned to Russia in 1840 only to quarrel with his parents over his mother's harsh treatment of the serfs on their family estate. He moved out and briefly worked as a clerk to support himself, but gave it up to write full-time. His short stories are full of compassion for the oppressed peasantry. When his mother died in 1850, he liberated all her serfs. He subsequently inherited a large amount of money and five years later left Russia for good. He died at his villa near Paris, and his body was returned to St. Petersburg for burial. Throughout his career, Turgenev advocated the Westernization of Russian lifestyles, in opposition to other writers of his generation like Dostoyevsky, who were profoundly suspicious of Western culture and proselytized the return of Old Russian and even Byzantine ideals. He coined the word nihilist, meaning to him, "a man who looks at everything from a critical point of view."

Ribman expanded the boundaries of the novella to give it a theatricality and wider applicability that the original lacked. The story centers on an insignificant clerk in a publishing office named Zolditch. He is such a nonentity, he goes totally ignored and unrecognized, a lonely figure beneath contempt. He dreams of making love to the publisher's daughter, or for that matter, *anyone's* daughter, and his fantasies are enacted on stage. He seduces not only the beautiful daughter but also his landlady and cleaning woman.

Running through Zolditch's sad story like a discordant counter theme is the character Chulkaturin and his successful, romantic adventures. Handsome, charming, and intelligent, Chulkaturin represents everything Zolditch wants to be and isn't. Chulkaturin takes the publisher's daughter to a dance, and Zolditch follows them, peering with envy from outside the French doors of the ballroom. When they appear on the terrace for a breather, Zolditch throws down his glove and challenges Chulkaturin to a duel in a fit of jealousy. Chulkaturin laughs at this insane little nobody and turns away without even answering. Zolditch persists like a darting wasp, and finally Chulkaturin takes up the gauntlet as a kind of joke. He allows Zolditch to fire first and, true to character, the clerk misses. Chulkaturin then fires a shot into the air and throws the pistol to the ground, laughing contemptuously. He returns to the ball and the publisher's daughter, and Zolditch is left once again to grovel in failure. In a brilliant final scene, the publisher hands Zolditch the manuscript of a new novel, saying, "Read this! This was written by a real author." Zolditch peruses the work, criticizing every line he comes across: "Look at that comma!" "Look at that noun!" But he realizes he is the only one paying attention, and the lights dim as he sinks back into the oblivion of alienation and loneliness.

THE JOURNEY OF THE FIFTH HORSE is a heart-rending love story. The role of Chulkaturin was first given to Rip Torn, but he was fired during rehearsals for being too difficult to work with. Larry Arrick, the director, replaced him with Michael Tolan, who played the character admirably opposite Susan Anspach as the publisher's daughter.

But Zolditch was the most important role of all and had to be cast carefully. There was a young actor who had done a noteworthy job the year before in The American Place's production of Ribman's first play, *HARRY, NOON, AND NIGHT*, co-starring with Joel Gray. He was what Wynn Handman called a "house actor—always hanging around St. Clement's, begging to be cast in any role at all, even appearing in the Sunday morning Interludes." Having shown what he could do in an important role in *HARRY*, Handman decided to give him Zolditch, partly because he seemed perfect for the role: short, thin, nervous, intense, and with a voice that still had the raw edges of the inner city about it. Unfortunately for the director and the rest of the cast, he was a slow read and took agonizingly long to get his part "fixed." Precious time was spent waiting for

him to work out the right interpretation in his mind before he would mount the stage and continue rehearsals. Handman recalled that the only other actor he knew who went through such preparatory anguish was the great actress Laurette Taylor, who could drive a company up the walls with her insecurity.

The "fix" was finally made. The characterization was perfect. And the young actor, in his high-buttoned, tight suit, round metal-rimmed spectacles, scraggly thin moustache, and hair sheared close above his ears, rasped his final line into stardom.

His name was Dustin Hoffman.

Within a year, Mike Nichols cast him as Benjamin Braddock in his film "The Graduate" with Anne Bancroft, and the rest, as they say...

He won an Obie for Best Actor of 1966, and the play won the Best New Play. It was another triumph for Wynn Handman and The American Place Theatre, and, I might add, a nice way for our Foundation to begin its career.

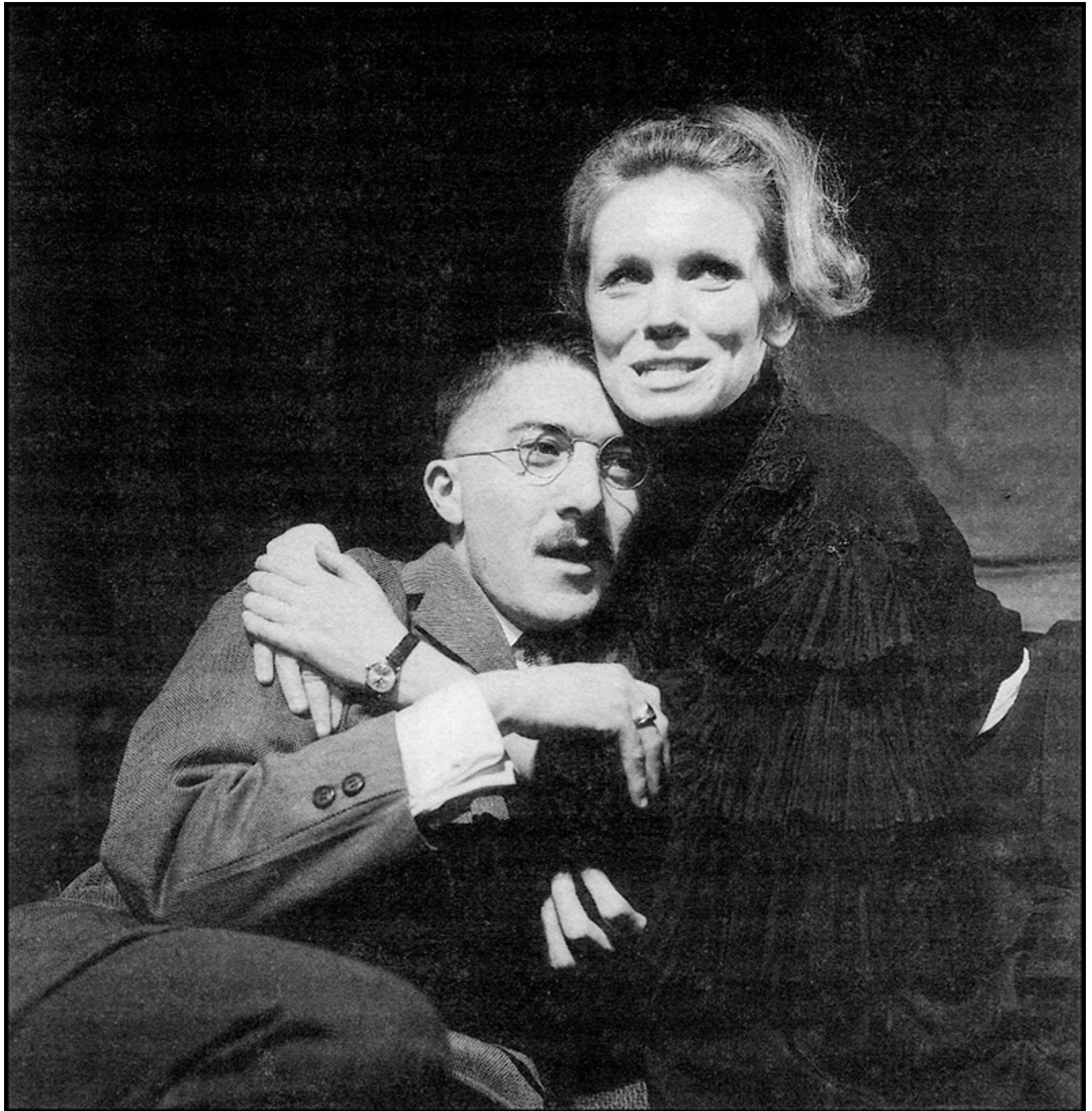
The production was not without its critics. Stanley Kaufmann of *The New York Times* called it trivial and said that Mr. Ribman had made nothing with his additions to the original story. Walter Kerr, reporting for the Herald Tribune, was even more contemptuous. But then they had praised AUNTIE MAME and SUPERMAN and had had nice things to say about the flaccid mounting of PHEDRE and the Lincoln Center revival of THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE. The weekly reviewers had been more kind. Even so, it prompted Richard Schickel of Harper's Magazine to ask what the point was of these little theater groups trying to present work that was new and stimulating, as The American Place's production of THE JOURNEY OF THE FIFTH HORSE had been, when the most important critics in New York refused to recognize the value of such projects. He found the situation downright depressing.

One morning in 1970, as I was painting in my studio, an announcement came over the radio that a house on 11th Street in Greenwich Village had just been blown up, and it was feared there were bodies buried inside the wreckage. I jumped on my bicycle and pedaled over there out of curiosity. Debris was strewn onto the street and firemen were trying to keep people from going near the smoking hole that was all that was left of the building. Later, several bodies were found, and it was determined that the basement had been the bomb factory for a group of misdirected middle class young people who called themselves the Weathermen. Their aim, it seemed, was to plant bombs in strategic government buildings that housed agencies they regarded as politically dangerous to society. Leonard Boudin, a prominent civil liberties lawyer, and his wife Jean, a poet, owned the house and were away in Europe at the time. Their daughter, Kathy, was one of the group's main movers and had helped convert the basement for the clandestine manufacture of the lethal correctives. But something had gone wrong, and this was the result. The young woman was not one of the dead. She had been seen escaping over the brick debris with another girl, and for years she was on the FBI's most-wanted list of criminals. (After eleven years as a fugitive, she reappeared, gave herself up, and began a twenty-year prison term at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester County.)

But that morning, in spite of the terrible mess and confusion of firemen and bystanders, there was an ominous calm along the street, blocked off between Sixth and Fifth Avenues. Standing in the middle of the rubble on the sidewalk was Dustin Hoffman, in dungarees and shirtsleeves, looking vaguely dazed. I walked my bike over to his side and asked if he were all right. He said yes but then told the harrowing story of what he and his wife had just gone through. They lived in the garden apartment next door to the blast, at Number Sixteen, and had been wakened by what they thought must have been an earthquake. The brick wall that separated them from the other house shook frantically, sending furniture and paintings across the room, and the noise was unbelievable.

After a few moments, he came out of his daze and began conversing fairly normally. To help ease his mind, I changed the subject to our first encounter at the very beginning of his career in JOURNEY OF THE FIFTH

HORSE. Did he remember it with any kind of nostalgia?



THE JOURNEY OF THE FIFTH HORSE (1965-66)

by Ronald Ribman American Place Theatre

Dustin Hoffman

Susan Anspach

photo by Martha Holmes

"Well, yeah. But I'll tell you, right now," and he looked ruefully around at the surreal landscape, "that seems a coupla light years away."

By the time the last bricks were carted off and the cavity boarded up, the Hoffmans had moved away.

Sidney Lanier and Michael Tolan also moved on. Sidney gave up the priesthood, got divorced, remarried, and settled in San Francisco to create his own religious center where he was still active in 1990. Michael went

on to establish the Apple Corps Theater Project in Chelsea. This left Wynn Handman as sole director of The American Place Theatre with all the attendant responsibilities, hardships, and rewards of a burgeoning company. Most of the basic goals had been his suggestions, anyway, so implementing them was a pleasure. He continued to champion plays by black and other minority writers, as well as little-known but important white dramatists. In the 1966-1967 season, he introduced a play by a new black playwright named Ronald Milner, entitled WHO'S GOT HIS OWN, and it was directed by another black, Lloyd Richards, who was destined to become a future dean of Yale Drama School; the next year, THE ELECTRONIC NIGGER, by another black newcomer, Ed Bullins, was presented and was successfully transferred to the Martinique Theater for an extended run under the title, THREE PLAYS BY ED BULLINS.

In spring, 1967, Sam Shepard, a young white graduate of Caffé Cino and La MaMa, debuted with LA TURISTA, directed by Jacques Levy, beginning a long, fruitful—if occasionally turbulent—relationship with The American Place. The play, parading the antics of an endearing bunch of hippies with a cast that included Lawrence Block, Joyce Aaron, Michael Lombard, and a tall, slim cowboy named Sam Waterston, was too surreal for most of the audiences; patrons left the theater in droves as if being pursued by the plague, and one critic was moved to suggest that the hole the theater occupied should be filled in and sealed. Even Handman's letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, explaining that the work was about "the white race disappearing, peeling away...from sunburn; or burning up, draining away...or disappearing from drugs or sleeping sickness..." didn't staunch the exodus. It took several more years and as many plays for Shepard to be appreciated



LA TURISTA, the first full-length play by Sam Shepard, American Place Theatre 1966-67. Lawrence Block, Joyce Aaron, Michael Lombard, Joel Novack, Sam Waterston (on floor)

photo by Martha Holmes

by Handman's theater goes. The last production of 1971—and incidentally, at the old space at St. Clement's before the move to new quarters—was a double bill of one-acts: the first, *BACK BOG BEAST BAIT*, by Shepard alone; the second, *COWBOY MOUTH*, in collaboration with Patti Smith, the popular poet/singer who was gaining a reputation as the "Maria Callas" of the rock-and-roll set in singing gigs at spots like CBGB and poetry reads at St.-Mark's-in-the-Bowery. (The collaboration led to a none-too-clandestine dalliance that proved embarrassing to Wynn Handman, who didn't want to be accused of helping foster a rift between Shepard and his young wife, O-lan Jones, whom he'd married at St. Mark's in 1969, in a colorful ceremony that to many was a culmination of a decade of Downtown subculture, complete with folk and rock music, poetry, and tie-dyed sentimentality. When the preacher got to asking who gave her in marriage, the entire congregation shouted in unison, "We do!") It was decided to keep the press away from the plays, and relations between Shepard and Handman cooled a bit for a time. But Sam returned to The American Place again in the 1974-1975 season with another pair of one-acts, *KILLER'S HEAD* and *ACTION*, and again in 1978-1979 with the full-length *SEDUCED*, a drama based on the final decaying days of Howard Hughes.

Other playwrights who had had their plays first produced at The American Place were also welcomed back with new work: Ronald Ribman with *THE CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE* (1967-1968), about Aethelred the Unready's vain attempts to keep his English kingdom from being conquered by the invading Danes and starring Donald Madden and Sandy Duncan; Ed Bullins with *THE PIG PEN* (1969-1970), depicting a black and white pot-and-sex party in high gear on the night Malcolm X is murdered and how the news affects each participant; and Robert Lowell with *ENDECOTT AND THE RED CROSS*, the intended final section of his historic trilogy, *THE OLD GLORY* (1967-1968), based on two Nathaniel Hawthorne stories about the Puritan Governor Endecott and his grim suppression of Thomas Merton's happy Anglican community at Merry Mount in 1630, ostensibly for its blatant behavior and free trading of guns and whiskey with the Indians.

For his second offering in the 1970-1971 season, Handman presented his subscribers with the first professionally staged play by a young playwright he'd nurtured for years. The play was *THE CARPENTERS*, and the playwright, Steve Tesich. Tesich was born in Yugoslavia and came to America at age fourteen. His work centered on family life and values, and the breakdown after transition to new cultures and environments. This one, starring Vincent Gardenia, tells about a struggling blue collar worker's decision to stay home with his wife and children for a day, only to find himself unwanted and even threatened with murder by one child if he doesn't get out of the house, which, metaphorically, is falling apart around them and in dire need of a carpenter's repairs. But where is one to be found? It is a pessimistic tale of lost authority and misunderstanding between generations that leads to the father's impotence and his offsprings' aimlessness.

Tesich's best work was presented at the end of the 1972-1973 season, after Handman had moved The American Place Theatre to its new home on 46th Street. Originally titled *BABA GOYA*, it starred Olympia Dukakis as Baba Goya, an oft-married, neurotic woman with several children of her own, who is desperate—yea, hungry—for more to replace them as they grow up and leave her nest, and for a new husband to replace their father when he kicks the bucket. She fills her house with oddball goofs, one of whom, a Japanese ex-con, is tethered permanently to a radiator with a length of chain attached to one leg. Everyone who enters her door is grist for her child mill, including a hapless cop on the beat. It was a funny and touching play that incorporated brilliant absurdist touches to seemingly conventional settings. It was decided to give it a commercial run the next year Off Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theater with an inexplicable change of title to *NOURISH THE BEAST*.

Handman and I both summered on Nantucket Island by that time, and he asked me one day to design the poster for the play's commercial run. It featured a line drawing cartoon of Dukakis in an animal-like fur coat, feeding gingerbread facsimiles of her captive "kids" to her alter-self emerging from the other end of the coat. It was okayed by the show's producer, Edgar Lansbury (brother of actress Angela, and an owner of one of my sculptures), and the image was used in newspaper ads as well as posters pasted up all over town. But I never

liked the new title, and it showed: it was arched up over the center like stairs, up which she climbed, looking back at her other image, and looked crowded and wordy. The audiences must have felt the same way about the production which folded soon after opening. All that was left was the green-and-white poster that still graced the theater's staircase in 1990.

Wynn Handman had long dreamed of moving his theater into a new setting where he could design the plan and shape to suit the work he was presenting instead of having to shoehorn everything into existing, inadequate and antiquated surroundings at the church. His dream was realized in 1970 in the basement offered him of a newly constructed building on 46th Street on the other side of Broadway near 6th Avenue. Under a new law that Mayor John Lindsay had been instrumental in getting passed, the air rights over the adjoining building could be bought if the real estate firm agreed to incorporate a legitimate playhouse in the structure. The two-story, underground area would include a cabaret-style theater with tables part way down a flight of stairs, a small experimental workshop space for one-man shows and readings, and a large theater another escalator's ride downward that would be designed like that of Dionysus. As if this were not enough to keep Wynn pinching himself to make sure he was awake, the space would be given to him free of charge! For his part, he would be responsible for maintenance and heating (which was not inconsiderable. By 1990, it cost one-hundred-thousand dollars a year to keep the lights on, for example).

Creating a theater in New York like that of Dionysus in ancient Athens was no idle wish. In the late 1960s, Handman was awarded a grant to travel and study the famous theaters of Europe. He left his young family in London while he crisscrossed the continent. Arriving in Greece was to him like going home; he loved everything about it. But mostly he loved that ancient pile of stones tumbling down the southern slope of the Acropolis "where comedy and tragedy had been invented, for God's sake!" He photographed it, measured distances, and made drawings of the few remaining details.

In October 1969, I, too, was measuring and marveling at that very site. On an unusually mild moonlit night, friends and I had finished dinner in one of the myriad *tavernas* of Athens' equivalent of Greenwich Village called the Plaka, and had decided to walk off the meal with a climb to the top of the Acropolis, taking the steep but shorter approach from the east. Above us, like a beacon, was the breathtaking Parthenon, lit by powerful floodlights below and the full moon above. We broke ranks at the summit and carved separate routes across the shadows of its battered columns. I chose the southern rim where the rock breaks away abruptly to offer a complicated panorama of downtown Athens, with its crisscrossing streets delineated by the pin pricks of a thousand street lights.

Directly beneath me, so far down the cliff I momentarily recoiled with dizziness, was all that was left of the legendary Theater of Dionysus, its semicircles of stone tiers flowing down into each other like water-worn soap carvings, ending at a low, broken wall that follows the circular shape of the flat orchestra (where most of the plays' actions took place) around to the back. There is only rubble there now, but it was once where a long, raised stage stood, complete with a back wall and probably a roof above, called all together *proskenion* (our proscenium), and side rooms, or wings, with doors entering onto the stage called *paraskenia*. A flight of steps connected the stage with the orchestra and continued on below to an underground room from where apparitions from the underworld ascended.

What is left of the ruins gives little indication of what the original architecture looked like. It is known that a place for worshiping the god Dionysus was on that spot since the beginning of Greek time, and that is was there that a theater existed where the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were performed. But between 342-326 ac., an Athenian financier, statesman, orator, and pupil of the philosopher Plato, named Lycurgus, took to erecting many new buildings and remodeling old ones. In renovating the Theater of Dionysus, he reworked some of the original marble with new designs and incorporated large dressing rooms and offices behind the back stage wall. Some of the diamond-shaped patterns that can be seen on remaining pieces of floor tiles that covered the orchestra were probably from his period. The bleacher seats of the sur-

rounding stadium were thought to be wooden at first, and he may have been instrumental in having them remade in stone.

But the puzzling conglomerate that has resulted over centuries due to the reuse of materials leaves little question about the basic concepts of the theater. A pencil dropped in the center of the orchestra can still be heard from anywhere in the upper reaches of the stadium. The sightlines are as good from the ends as from the middle of the semicircle.

I sat dangling my legs over the edge of the Acropolis, contemplating the birthplace of theater, until the floodlights were extinguished, and it all became a dim, bluish blob amid the encroaching black ink blots of olive trees and spiky cypress. The guards scouted the perimeter and rounded everyone up, directing us to leave by the main western gate. The moon had taken five behind a cloud, so the walk back down the hill was unlit. Far below, beyond the tree trunks, was a ruby necklace of back lights on waiting taxis. But straight ahead was a high wall of dense foliage that made a perfect background for the vivid pictures still racing across our eyes. We strode the winding macadam way in uncharacteristic silence. Our moonlight meeting with history had left us all, for once, speechless.

Wynn Handman's dream theater was completed in time for the first fall production of 1971, its many innovations becoming prototypes for other newly designed theaters across the country: the shape of the stage could be altered from proscenium to thrust at will; space for ramps was included up the center; and audience seating could be clustered or evenly spaced on fanned tiers like that of Dionysus, or removed entirely. The stage itself could be shrunk to accommodate an intimate puppet show or expanded for wide-open epic plays. The finished results became a monument to one man's vision, and that vision—to see American drama become a worthy and important component of our country's literature—never wavered or diminished.

Handman's outstanding quality was his ability to convey his tireless enthusiasm for the theater in an infectious, sometimes confrontational manner to those about him. An actor had been what he aspired to be originally, and he continued to teach acting as an adjunct to the development of The American Place. He turned out an impressive roster of talented young performers, some of whom got their starts in his productions and went on to be successful, well-known personalities on their own, especially in films. Among them were Mia Farrow, Michael Douglas, Richard Gere, Raul Julia, Frank Langella, and Burt Reynolds.

New York critics, especially of the larger uptown dailies, remained generally brutal in their reviews of the plays presented at APT throughout its history, and in many instances, inexplicably so. Walter Kerr, then writing for *The New York Times*, was so vitriolic about a play by Jeff Wanshel titled ISADORA DUNCAN SLEEPS WITH THE RUSSIAN NAVY in a February 9, 1977, review that it prompted Howard Klein, then director of Arts at the Rockefeller Foundation, to reply in print, "I found no fault whatsoever with his (Walter Kerr's) judgment of the play itself, for that is a matter of opinion. But what moves me to write was his more general attack on The American Place Theatre and its valuable service to contemporary playwrights through its policy of producing new plays that do not fall into the tried-and-true category.

"The Rockefeller Foundation each year awards up to eight fellowships to playwrights who have had at least one major production and who have demonstrated a commitment to playwriting. The writers are chosen by a national panel of theater professionals. The fellowships are administered by a producing theater, and the writer spends a period of time in residence with that theater. Among the past grantees are some of our most important contemporary writers for the stage.

"Each of the fifty writers we have assisted in the past six years has selected a theater of residency from a list of about forty theaters. To date, the fifty writers have had residence in thirty theaters; nine of the playwrights have chosen The American Place Theater—almost ten percent...Each of the resident playwrights (at American Place) has praised the standards of the theater and has expressed satisfaction with the productions.

"If the Foundations are to be of any help to writers in the theater, they must rely on theaters such as The

American Place to provide them with the care and nourishment that we all know from bitter experience will not be afforded them on Broadway, at the universities, or at most of the regional theaters in the country.

"That is why I was so disturbed by the broadside attack on a theater that is, professionally speaking, an essential part of the American theater...I wonder if he (Kerr) realized how precariously balanced are our non-profit institutions, how important the press is to their survival, and how damaging to their future financial support a review can be which impugns the validity of the organization beyond merely deploring its productions. The American Place has never abandoned its original artistic goals of doing experimental work. To knowingly harm such a theater of integrity would be reckless. For to lose one theater which champions experimentalists is, in the context of American theater, to lose much."

Handman exhorted critics and audiences to let themselves "be available to the new worlds of these plays—do not work at finding meanings, let it happen to you, let the play spray on you, let the images soak in, let yourself move into a new space. Have room for the contemporary writers." And he practiced what he preached.

Chapter Four

How Do You Dress For A Grant?

January 1967

“Art business is Show Business, pure and simple,” the late painter/raconteur Andrew Shunney once confided to me from his swivel perch at the bar of the Jared Coffin House on Nantucket Island.

“You gotta paint ‘cause you gotta dance. You gotta write ‘cause you gotta sing. That’s it! Everybody’s an entertainer.”

Then, satisfied that he had polished another gem to add to his bag of boozy dictums (an earlier one was, “The worst fate for an artist is to end up with the largest collection of his own work!”), he raised his third rob roy of the evening to toast the encroaching fog that was just then flattening its nose against the outside of the window and threatening to blur his until-now perfectly clear vision.

I thought of Andrew and that soppy November night as I vaguely toyed with the notion of getting artistically involved in some aspect of avant-garde theater now that I was within coin-throwing distance of it; like, maybe, stage design. But it had been me alone with the canvas or block of wood so long, I wondered if it would even be possible to work successfully with a group of individuals on a shared-talent basis, with someone else calling the shots. I frankly doubted it, but the prospect pricked my imagination. The theater had grabbed at me once before, and it might be doing it again with a different twist.

Certainly I had outgrown the adolescent fantasy of walking unknown streets with everyone recognizing my face, speaking my name, and applauding softly as I passed by. Or had I? Maybe friend Andrew was more on the beam than his cups indicated. For artists as well as performing seals, admiring smiles, words of approval, and encouraging pats on the head work wonders at getting the creative juices flowing. You gotta paint ‘cause you gotta dance ‘cause you gotta be adored!

Anyway, time passed with the idea no more than a recurring dream, delicious to rerun at 4:00 A.M. from beneath the safety of a counterpane with all the glamorous possibilities trotted out behind my eyelids—I could maybe be to Off Off Broadway what Norman Bel Geddes or Santo Loquasto or Ming Cho Lee were to the Great White Way (with none of the attendant headaches and hassles). Then chance put me in the right (wrong) place at the right (wrong) time, and the rest, as they say, was blistery.

The time was early January 1967, and the place was the parish house of another moribund Episcopal enclave seventeen blocks south and west of St. Clement’s. It was an ell to the Church of the Holy Apostles, squatting on a grass kerchief at the corner of 28th Street, stitched in all around by a high ornamental black iron fence, in the area of Manhattan called Chelsea. It was surrounded on three sides by the towering balconies of one of the city’s largest and predominantly Jewish housing projects built by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Its neighbor across 9th Avenue was a chalky brick structure that served as a branch of the Department of Health (administering, among other things, the vaccinations and shots required for travel abroad), behind a crumbling patio where dense foliage allowed coins of sunlight to spatter its concrete benches and the hunched blobs of humanity that congregated and slept there. South of it was an elementary school whose windows proclaimed each season with garish paper cut-outs pasted on them—the only color to be found in the acres of drab brown brick that continued to below 26th Street and connected with another poorer, mostly Hispanic project. The area reeked of ethnic diversity.

The Chelsea Theatre Center, under its founder and artistic director Robert Kalfin, had taken over the parish house for offices and rehearsal space and performed inside the church on weekends. At the time Kalfin was Associate Director of the Department to Extend the Professional Theater of Actors Equity Association, that worked at helping form new theater projects in various parts of the United States. He had directed and

co-produced Off Broadway productions (most notably *THE GOLEM*, a Yiddish drama by Halper Leivick in an English translation) and was a former associate producer for WNTA and WOR television channels. His academic background included a B.A. in Speech and Drama from Alfred University and a M.F.A. degree in Directing at the Yale Drama School.

Unlike The American Place that was originally formed to serve the theater community, Kalfin envisioned the CTC as a kind of cultural neighborhood center, involving all the polyglot ethnic elements that abounded in the area. Local youth were encouraged to volunteer to learn stage crafts, writing, and costume design. Performances were free so that those who had never experienced theater before either through ignorance or lack of funds could acquaint themselves with the theater's special magic.

The audiences so far had consisted of retirees from the ILGWU; families fluent only in Spanish from across the street; church members; the bums who inhabited the park and ate at the daily soup kitchen the church maintained; theater professionals attracted by the quality of professionalism and innovation that it represented; and most interesting (and scary) of all, members of the neighborhood's fiercest warring gangs who had developed a defensive pride in seeing to it the area within the iron railings remained neutral turf.

Kalfin's primary interest was in presenting material that dealt with or at least reflected contemporary issues and events. Predominantly a playwrights' theater like American Place, CTC embraced a wider concept of the medium: to include nonverbal, confrontational, and autobiographical works, presaging the concept of performance art that was to develop and flourish in the 1980s.

Bob Kalfin had begun the CTC in 1965 at St. Peter's Church on 20th Street, yet another Episcopal parish that was flagging with the times, but situated in a far more affluent section of Chelsea. The first year he presented staged readings of new one-act plays, mustering all-star casts from his acquaintances at Actors' Equity who agreed to perform free of charge. Notables like Mildred Dunnock, Shirley Knight, Colleen Dewhurst, Roscoe Lee Browne, Josephine Premice, Kim Hunter, and Will Greer interpreted works by twenty-three unknown writers and served also as drawing cards for other theater professionals who began donating time and talent to the center.

But things didn't progress well at St. Peter's. Kalfin's troubles began with his choice of plays. Unlike Wynn Handman who appealed to writers already known for their literature to turn to dramatic forms, he encouraged everyone but literary types to write for him. He was especially partial to jazz musicians and felt their flair for rhythm and improvisation could be transposed into exciting theater experiments. He met Archie Shepp, then a leading black saxophonist who had become prominent as the co-leader of the New York Contemporary Five and later led his own group, and urged him to begin writing. Born in Fort Lauderdale in 1937, Shepp was an apologist and eloquent spokesman for "free jazz" which he tried to develop as a medium for political commentary. He joined the faculty of black studies at SUNY Buffalo and after 1974 taught at the University of Massachusetts.

The play they created together was originally titled *THE COMMUNIST* and was the twenty-third staged reading of that first year. Its blatantly vulgar language and blunt depictions of contemporary Negro life offended many of the parishioners. The bishop was notified, and he soon countermanded the welcome that Father Jenks, the church's rector, had so generously extended. Publicly it was all presented as a conflict over the group's taking over the parish hall that had previously been used for basketball games and occasional church bazaars, but in fact it was all about filthy language—and another incident that occurred simultaneously back at St. Clement's that was causing wide consternation throughout Episcopal circles.

Sidney Lanier (the priest and co-founder of The American Place) had just recently defrocked himself, got divorced, and remarried another divorcee. The ensuing scandal made momentary tabloid history and for weeks every minute detail of the affair was sensationalized. The church hierarchy was shocked and embarrassed and immediately began questioning all extracurricular activities in its parish churches. An eventual crackdown followed but, strangely enough, it had almost no effect on The American Place which continued

undisturbed.

Bounced from St. Peter's, Kalfin looked all over the Chelsea area for another available space without success. Finally, in desperation, he made what would turn out to be an ingenious move. He called on his adversary, the bishop, and told him in plain words about the predicament his Eminence had caused. To his delight and surprise, the bishop offered him Holy Apostles which, as a mission church like St. Clement's, was supposedly exempt from the strictures that determined the spiritual life of his regular churches. And, Kalfin discovered, it was more moribund than St. Peter's, so any last-ditch effort to keep it open would be encouraged.

The drawback with Holy Apostles, as Kalfin soon learned, was that the parish hall wasn't large enough to perform in. So the productions had to be mounted in the main sanctuary of the church proper directly behind the altar. A functional three-level stage, twenty-four feet by twenty feet, was built. Kalfin and his crew designed it so that it could be used as a flat or raked platform and could be dismantled in one hour by a single person, if necessary, so that scheduled Sunday services and sporadic funerals could be held without interference.

Unlike St. Clement's, the sanctuary was never permanently converted to a theater space. The audience sat in the rigid oak pews off the main aisle, and the altar, which remained in place, was hidden by removable dark-brown curtains (hand-sewn by ladies of the congregation) that traversed the width of the chancel.

The church itself was an antique gem—a leftover landmark from another, less frugal era. Built in 1844 in Tuscan style by Minard LeFever, it opened for services four years later and in 1854 was lengthened considerably. The transepts by Charles Babcock were added in 1858. The original stained glass windows by William J. Bolton remained in place until a devastating fire—begun under one of the roofs, it was believed, by a spark from an acetylene torch while workmen were doing major renovations the week before Christmas, 1989—destroyed most of them.

From outside, the church seemed to be all lowlying roof supporting a tremendous fat copper spire, like a peasant fist with an erect index finger stabbing the all-weather sky in fierce admonition. The distant Empire State Building could be seen between the surrounding monoliths pointing its own grey digit heavenward like a vague echo. While crawling about the rafters over the sanctuary to secure the lighting equipment and electrical conduits needed for stage illumination, a secret chamber was discovered above the organ loft that turned out to have been constructed by a turn-of-the-century minister for his little crippled daughter to view the proceedings below without being seen by the public. It became the symbolic Siberia that actors were told they would be banished to if they didn't learn their lines.

Kalfin had appointed David Long the managing director of the Chelsea Theatre Center at the outset. Long, who grew up in Colorado, attending the University of Colorado, Howard University, and Arizona State, majoring in music theory and composition, had previously worked with him as associate producer on *THE GOLEM*. Small, blond-haired, and lively, he became a popular figure after the move to Holy Apostles. He ingratiated himself with the parishioners and was eventually elected to the vestry. There was a long-dormant bell still in place in the belfry and the Reverend Robert Griswold delegated him the official bell-ringer, with the condition that he get it working again. He did, and soon it heralded every Sunday service as well as clanging sonorously for thirty minutes before the start of each performance.

I attended, on impulse, one of the first play readings there—*JOHANNES* by Bill Gunn, with Colleen Dewhurst and Roscoe Lee Browne—and urged the young directors to contact me about a possible grant. It wasn't until twenty-five years later, during a telephone reminiscence with Bob Kalfin, that I learned that that simple invitation touched off days of frantic discussion at the center—not over whether to accept the offer or not (that was decided the moment I voiced it), but about what they should wear to their first interview with a foundation director. Several hotly debated board meetings were held over the issue. The business suit contingent won out by a thread after one late-night session, and the two young men appeared at my studio door at the appointed hour nattily turned out in Madison Avenue sartorial splendor. David, his hair slicked flat,

even wore a pair of wing tips that probably hadn't come in contact with his feet since college graduation. Bob sported a striped shirt and rep tie under his two-button jacket, and the corona of tight black curls encircling his head had been brilliantined until it glistened. He looked the epitome of the nice Jewish boy dressed for a bar mitzvah to impress the relatives.

The confrontation was a decided shock to all three of us, causing instant embarrassment. For there I stood, in torn jeans, paint-spattered tee shirt pulled shapeless from having brushes wiped on it, and thong sandals that no self-respecting Greenwich Village denizen at that time would be caught dead without (they were to a certain era what Reeboks were to the '80s). Being new to the game myself, I obviously didn't know how to dress for the occasion either. In fact, I probably hadn't even given it a thought before they showed up. I do remember inviting them to remove their jackets while I pulled on a clean shirt so we could sit down on more or less equal terms.

The grant was discussed and promised. Kalfin, heretofore tense and serious, beamed with delight. His handsome tanned face lost its strained lines, and he looked around the crowded studio for the first time. Neither of them had any idea I was a painter. They stared at several canvases leaning against the wall, whispered something to each other I couldn't hear, and returned to where I sat behind the glass coffee table.

"Have you ever thought of doing stage sets?" Kalfin asked.

"Way-ull..." I drawled and confessed my nocturnal fantasy. They nodded impatiently as if they had already decided something. Kalfin broke in to tell about his project with Archie Shepp; how the play had gone through a change of title (as well as just about everything else) since its notorious St. Peter's days, and that he hoped with the grant to mount it as their first fully staged production.

"I'm looking for a set designer who isn't hampered by too much previous experience," he continued, "you know, with a hackneyed approach and all that? Why don't you think it over and come to a rehearsal next week. I'd let you have a script only it keeps changing every day, and we can't afford to run off that many copies. But if you came, you could get an idea of the plot and maybe begin working up some ideas we can look at."

I heard myself saying I'd think about it and let him know, but the inner voice was saying, "Do it! Do it! Gotta dance!" They donned their jackets and turned to the door, looking like they wanted to kiss me. (They did want to—Kalfin admitted it twenty-five years later.) We shook hands, and I repeated I'd call them within the week with my decision. But when they'd gone, I flipped the lock and said aloud to the back of the door, "Yes, Lordy, yes!"

The three-story parish house was a blunt brick punctuation mark to the main church, separated partly by an unlovely asphalt driveway. Even its arched windows seemed like roughed-in imitations of the celebrated originals across the way. But inside was a small isolated world unto itself, bristling with activity. The days began and ended with the feeding of the multitudes, from across the street and elsewhere, who silently filed into the first-floor soup kitchen. (By 1990, it had grown to be the largest in New York, straining its still-meager resources to accommodate the startling increase of hungry homeless who had fallen victims, in part, to a recent national recession that showed no signs of easing soon; and most harrowing of all, statistics showed almost two-thirds of them under the age of thirty.) The Chelsea Theatre Center maintained five offices and a costume room on the top floor; a large rehearsal hall and production office on the second; and used the first floor beyond the kitchen after meals were over and tables stacked up.

It was in that makeshift dining area that I found the company already at work on a read-through on my first hesitant visit. (I had blown hot and cold on the project ever since agreeing to do it and had trudged up Ninth Avenue from the Village in fits and starts against the harsh January wind, slowing down when my mind said Don't do it, and quickening pace when it said Do, and arrived in a state of apprehension.) The principals were seated on folding chairs, their elbows stabbing the lone dining table left standing in the middle of the room. Kalfin eyed me as I entered and indicated I sit in an empty chair across from him, then he lost

himself again in the pages before him and didn't acknowledge my presence until the end of the session. No one else paid any attention to me either, so I sat there dumbly staring from face to face as each actor spoke lines, then finally sidled up to the fellow nearest me and tried to follow his script through the triangle his bent arm made holding up his head.

The name of the play was JUNEBUG GRADUATES TONIGHT, and it was billed as a jazz allegory. The storyline still focused on a young Negro youth named Junebug (the term "black" was not generally used in 1967 to describe individuals, but it had gained some popularity as a collective adjective, as in the Black Civil Rights Movement and LeRoi Jones' Black Arts Theatre) who was just about to graduate from high school as the class valedictorian. He (Glynn Turman) is very confused about what to say in his speech and first visits his mother Jessie (Minnie Gentry) who, in the song "Hollow Days, Mellow Days," looks back on her own unhappy marriage and desertion and sings of her pride in a son who has advanced so far in the white man's world. Disturbed by what he perceives as her "tokenism," he wanders to a park in the next scene where he meets his white girlfriend America (Marilyn Chris). Under a spreading tree, he expounds on Marx and Lenin as she, in a fake southern drawl, counters with pointed black-white word games. Then an old man whom Junebug has recently befriended named Uncle Sam (John Coe) enters, shirtless and shivering with cold. Junebug gives him his shirt, and he joins them under the tree and extols the American way of life. Junebug alternates between acceptance and rejection in the song "Let Freedom Ring" which, with the next two numbers in this scene, "I Dig Action" sung by Uncle Sam and "Poor Foolish Frightened Boy" sung by America, are the musical high points of the piece.

Act Two, Scene One, takes place in a temple where Junebug seeks out his estranged father Muslim (Moses Gunn), a fanatical preacher who angrily denounces any accommodation with the white world in a harsh diatribe "Allah." Again, Junebug is confused but responds that he thinks his father's views are wrong, that only through nonviolence do Negroes have a chance to prevail.

Back on the street, Junebug is confronted by the chorus who, in the song "Hey Now," voice their own disparate ideas in a shouting match that ends in a loud cacophony of discord causing Junebug to hold his ears and run away. The next scene shows his sister Sonja (Rosalind Cash), a whore, in a bedroom of a fleabag hotel accommodating an archetypical Southern redneck john. After their love making, she sits on the side of the bed and laments "Scorin' Makes A Girl Seem Old," followed by her cynical admission that she cooperates with "Whitey" only as a means to her own opportunistic ends.

Finally, graduation night arrives in Act Two, Scene Two. A grand procession to the music of Walter Davis wends its way through a bombed-out church (actually the center aisle of Holy Apostles), led by Junebug's mother and sister, followed by his aunts Julia (Beatrice Winde) and Celia (Cynthia Belgrave), dressed in white frocks and hats and sporting corsages on their shoulders. Muslim arrives in a gleaming white caftan tied at the waist by a red sash, and a scull cap, still fiercely defiant and arrogant, followed by Cowboy (Brad Sullivan), another stereotypical American legend, in white boots and ten-gallon hat. At the rear of the procession, following the motley crowd of townspeople, swaggers Uncle Sam, who has covered his star-studded undershorts and red suspenders with his famous signature garb: striped red-and-white skinny trousers over spatted high shoes, topped by a dark-blue satin cutaway jacket and decorated stovepipe hat. On his arm walks America in a flouncy white little-girl party dress, white stockings and red pumps, around her waist a wide belt of blue stars between red bands.

They all take places behind a bunting-draped table (from the soup kitchen) as Junebug begins his oration. He has chosen in the end to be positive about his country in spite of its treatment of his people and voices hope for a better tomorrow. He embraces America, who immediately—I never did know why!—goes into a pathetic strip tease, dropping her dress to reveal a skimpy spread-eagle bra and panties whose focal point is a big glittery star trimmed in fringe covering (in ecdysiast parlance) her snatch.

The rest of the plot lost me entirely (as it did most of the audiences who stomped out on it, even after weeks

of fruitless revisions). Uncle Sam, in a blind rage of vicious epithets, pulls out a gun and shoots Junebug, then America. They fall in each other's arms in true Wagnerian style and slowly sink to the floor amid the wailing of the guests-turned-Greek-chorus which by now includes, besides the principles, the fourteen additional one-liners and walk-ons (local kids).

This was the basic structure of the drama as it was read at that first rehearsal. But it was altered, sometimes drastically, during the course of the run: new lines were written and dropped daily; entirely different concepts were added out of nowhere and then discarded. By the time the costumes and sets were finished, ideas had to be reworked to fit them again since there was no money or time to revise the physical setup. Shepp was constantly adding, subtracting, and altering tunes in attempts to make the rhythm of the dialogue behave like improvisational jazz compositions, with bursts of brilliant passages that were first simply stated, then embellished with variations, then variations of variations, and finally allowed to soften and fade, as another voice picked up the theme and took it down another road of thought. All this was obviously easier said than done, and in the end the cast and the rest of us were so confused and frustrated that we were at the point of rebellion. But that is getting ahead of the story.

After that first reading, the actors fell back against their chairs, bleary-eyed and exhausted. Foreheads had to be mopped in spite of the drafts that snuck in under the loose windows and whipped the haze of blue cigarette smoke overhead into whorls. They stretched hard and stomped their feet, making guttural animal noises. Chairs scraped back and coats were being reached for before Kalfin got around to introducing me. They must all have wondered who that was bobbing his head around one of them trying to read the script. Offhandedly, he called out my name and announced I was the set designer for the production. Like that. They turned and stared briefly. One clapped his hands a few times. Then they went back to zipping, buttoning, folding, and wrapping up to face the elements. Moses Gunn patted my shoulder gently on leaving and said, "Glad to see you here." Then he joined the others single-filing down the stairs. When Kalfin reached the stairway, he called back to me, "If you're the last one out, turn off the lights, will you, please?" Then he descended.

He simply assumed I knew where the switch was, which I didn't; but that, I found later, wasn't unusual. Kalfin made assumptions about everything. In my case, he'd assumed I had agreed to be set designer without asking me; he'd assumed I knew when the next rehearsal was; and he'd assumed I would take responsibility for constructing the sets. Assumptions piled up on assumptions, and they would lead to a big blowup in the end. But for the moment, I complied and searched the empty hall for the light switch, finding it in a closet. Feeling my way in the dark, I had a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. I hadn't pictured my first rehearsal quite like this. But, oh well. I did the stairs by Braille and going down, pictured my playbill credit line in the blackness:

Sets assumed by Donn Russell

David Long called the next day and arranged for a meeting to discuss the staging. At it, he, Kalfin, Shepp, and I agreed that for convenience and budget, there should be only one major set-piece for each scene, and it would have to be capable of being carried on and off stage quickly by two or three stagehands during the blackouts.



JUNEBUG GRADUATES TONIGHT (1966-67)

Chelsea Theater Center

John Coe

Marilyn Chris

by Archie Shepp

I suggested a flat, instead of raked, stage to emphasize the two-dimensional frieze effect I had in mind. The audience would see it mainly at eye level, so the props would be given exaggerated depth to make both the feeling of deep space and cockeyed perspective apparent but mostly symbolical. For example, the front ends and legs of the kitchen table in Act One, Scene One, would actually be lower than the knees of the women folk seated behind it to produce the effect of looking down on the proceedings.

For the Prologue and Finale (Act Two, Scene Two), a bombed-out church, I designed a tall, broken stained

glass window that narrowed as it rose to a Gothic point to make it seem cathedral high and fashioned panes of colored cellophane that, when backlit, threw dramatic patterns over the players before it. For Act One, Scene Two, when Junebug, America, and Uncle Sam converse in the park, a single, large flat cut-out tree of basic dark green with foot-long lighter leaves glued to it in clusters was approved. The sleazy hotel where sister Sonja does her stuff was indicated by an oversized plywood bed made like a parallelogram with a footboard covered with lipstick “XX”s and headboard adorned with a pulsating neon-pink heart facing the audience. The bed itself slanted off at an oblique angle to show the action taking place on it more clearly.

Eventually, another set-piece had to be added for the Epilogue that was created during the last days of rehearsal. It was a four-foot by six-foot sheet of plywood painted to show the figures of Uncle Sam and America, arm in arm, in their graduation attire with cut-outs at the top for real heads to be thrust through, like props in instant-photography booths at carnivals and amusement parks. Sequins spangled the lapels of Uncle Sam’s cutaway and the big star at America’s puckered crotch. When the scene opened, the two characters were already in place behind the props with heads through the openings: he with his ubiquitous stovepipe hat and she with a five-pointed tiara like the Statue of Liberty’s. At the scene’s end, they emerged from behind wearing the same costumes depicted, with America even holding a bouquet of deep red roses like the crepe paper fakes glued to the plywood. The intended visual message was that America and Uncle Sam remained the same indelible symbols regardless what other guises they tried to adopt or barriers they tried to hide behind.

All the set-pieces were to be painted in flat primary colors with thick black outlines for the cartoon effect I thought best captured the style of the dialogue which, as Kalfin directed it, seemed to burst into the air above the players like comic strip balloons. Small-scale cardboard models were made first for approval, and it wasn’t until Kalfin, Shepp, and Long had given the final okay to begin construction that I was hit with the biggest shocker so far: I was not only supposed to build the pieces, I was expected to pay for all the materials as well. Kalfin had previously submitted the production cost breakdown to me when I agreed to give him a grant (wearing my Foundation director’s hat), but now he informed me, under my carpenter’s cap, that although three-hundred dollars had been allocated on paper for the sets and an additional one-hundred dollars for props, there actually wasn’t enough cash on hand to pay for them. The costumes, it seemed, were eating up unexpected chunks of the budget that hadn’t been foreseen. In the next weeks, I was to learn how, after the numbness wore off.

But first, out of curiosity and the fact that I had never (as Foundation director) really read over the production costs the first time around, I dug the document out of the file and scrutinized it more carefully:

CHELSEA THEATER CENTER—
BREAKDOWN OF PRODUCTION COSTS

Full Production—JUNEBUG by Archie Shepp
Total Costs—Six Weeks

Design: Sets—\$300, Costumes—\$200, Lights—\$200, Props—\$100	<u>\$800</u>
Promotion: Printing—\$200, Mailing—\$300, Photos—\$200	<u>\$700</u>
Fees: Author—\$500, Director—\$500, Set Design—\$200, Costume—\$200, Lights—\$200	<u>\$1,600</u>
Salaries Stage Manager—\$480, Actors—\$5,020, Press Agent—\$900, Stagehands—\$200, Musicians—\$960	<u>\$7,560</u>
General Expenses: Music Copying—\$250, Payroll Taxes—\$600, Insurance—\$200, Programs—\$100, Equity League Pension Fund—\$400	<u>\$1,550</u>
<u>Actual Cost of Production</u>	<u>\$12,210</u>

It didn't much matter that Sets, Costumes, and Lights got double-listed (the second time under "Fees" of all things). The whole document was a dream wish. By opening night, what could be paid for, was. The rest got vaguely categorized under the heading of "Volunteers of America."

Bob Kalfin insisted I sit in at the next costume conference, as a Foundation director *and* set designer this time, to learn how unexpected things happen to the best-laid production plans.

It took place on a subsequent weekday evening at 6:00 P.M. because the costume designer Evelyn Thompson held down one fulltime day job plus three part-time night positions and that was the only time she had for a meeting. The soup kitchen didn't serve nightly meals so the "dining" room on the first floor was again the setting.

As I entered, I heard Kalfin's voice articulating very slowly and carefully, as if for the umpteenth time, and knew by now that it meant he was tired, frustrated, angry, or all three. I figured I'd better make myself as inconspicuous as possible and dropped into the nearest seat inside the door.

"All right, ladies. Let's go through that once more. Do *any* of you own a pair of white shoes?"

The five main actresses in the play were on metal chairs lined up neatly before him. By chance, they had placed themselves by skin color gradations from dark (Winnie Gentry, Beatrice Winde, and Cynthia Belgrave) to light (Rosalind Cash) to white (Marilyn Chris). In unison, they shook their heads in a slow, voiceless "No."

“Well, what about black, Evelyn? Do any of you have *black* shoes?” His voice began to whine.

Again, unanimous, side-to-side, slow “No.”

“Oh, now wait a minute,” Evelyn interrupted, looking up from her doodled yellow pad, “we’ve GOT to have white shoes for the graduation scene. That was the whole POINT. White everything on everybody! It has to be that way. Black shoes with white dresses and hats would look stupid. No, Bob, I insist the shoes have got to be white.”

Junebug’s mothers, aunts, sister, and girlfriend threw each other subtle but knowing sidelong glances. As seasoned veterans of the Off Off Broadway circuit, they knew that, although under the special Actors’ Equity Workshop Code, their only compensation would be daily round trip subway fares (and the “priceless” exposure that every artistic director assured them would be theirs once the show went public), there were certain sweet perquisites that went with the territory if one was clever enough to work the angles. One very important one was the possibility of getting to keep certain customized costume accessories after the run. And with spring not far down the road, white shoes would be a very nice addition to any woman’s wardrobe.

“All right, all right,” Kalfin sighed heavily, then looked over at me and shrugged, “See? We’ve got to squeeze the purse again, this time for four new pairs of white shoes. Oy!” (America would wear black pumps.) Back to Thompson, “Evelyn, take their sizes before they leave. But check the Salvation Army on Eighth first, just in case...” “No,” she shot back. “N-E-W white shoes.”

“Right.”

Kalfin obviously respected her and was grateful that she was trying to fit this show into her tight schedule. She had designed the costumes for the first production of a work-in-progress for CTC, FIVE DAYS by Henry Zeiger. She had done the costumes for the Equity Library Theatre productions of COME BACK LITTLE SHEBA and THE THURBER CARNIVAL, and a slew of summer stock plays including OEDIPUS REX, UNCLE VANYA, and THIEVES’ CARNIVAL. She was Assistant Costume Designer for the *Garry Moore Show* and at the moment was performing that function for the program *Coliseum* on CBS-TV. In spite of her fragile, waif-like appearance and mild manner, she had just shown an iron will and determination that must have served her in good stead with all her varied assignments.

Now that the crisis was over (and won), she had something far more serious to report.

“You’re not going to believe this,” she blurted, and everyone got comfortable. Then she told of her frustrations trying to deal with the three young trainees sent over from the Youth Corps’ Mobilization For Youth program. They really had tried to learn to sew costumes, she said, but the lack of appropriate supervision by an experienced technician had led to some disastrous results. For example, one of the costumes for America got finished before she had time to instruct the girls on doing it correctly. They were so pleased with their work that they persuaded Marilyn to try it on before Thompson examined it. To everyone’s horror, two costumes had been sewn together—inside out (they probably figured one to be the lining), and the inner one was made of metallic thread which made it impossible for her to move without being scratched to shreds. The bunching of all that material under the armpits threatened to cut off her circulation when she lowered her arms to her sides.

“Yeah,” she interjected, “a hair shirt would be more comfortable than this.”

No matter how explicit she made her drawings, Thompson said, the trainees couldn’t understand them. Nor did they understand her telephone instructions. In fact, they barely understood English.

“And to top it all off, they sewed one of Uncle Sam’s jacket sleeves on backwards so when John put it on, it looked like he was facing one direction and his arm another. Dis-AS-ter!” she croaked and broke us up.

A loud laugh came unexpectedly from a dark corner of the room away from the glare of the overhead fluorescent. It was Anthony Perkins, the movie actor, who until then had been so quiet I hadn’t noticed him.

His lanky frame spidered across several folding chairs, and his head was momentarily thrown back gleefully, straining his gaunt neck muscles. I'd heard the rumor that he haunted the premises, often arriving without much notice, speaking little, and suddenly disappearing. But this was the first time I had encountered him. He had on a black turtleneck over skinny black jeans that were pinched at the ankles by metal bicycle clips. He was intimate with Kalfin and was one of the original board members of the Center. He also maintained a keen interest in the company's day-to-day activities, and, when he wasn't on location in Hollywood or somewhere, he could be seen at all hours of the day tooling his bike across Chelsea to the parish hall to check things out. At the moment, he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying them.

Perkins was at the height of his popularity then but remained a taciturn, introspective loner who, during the next four or five weeks that I worked at the Center, would be seen standing in a doorway, momentarily engrossed in the proceedings, and then at another glance minutes later, would have disappeared down the stairs. The other actors were aware of him, of course, out of the corners of their eyes and over their scripts. Few waved to him or communicated in any way, nor did he. But he was, after all, a famous movie star at the moment and the tingle of being in the company of his likes grabbed all of them. You heard his name whispered in the corridor at coffee breaks after he'd come and gone, especially among the women of the company, and it added a touch more luster to "being in the business."

One end of the second floor rehearsal hall was designated the Prop Department, partitioned off with stacked folding chairs. The choice of the location had less to do with convenience or prevailing light than the fact that it was near the only double electric outlet that worked—sort of. When the hand drill was turned on, the ceiling neons filed complaining winks and sputters, and the sweep hand of the electric clock I'd placed on the window sill fluttered like an eyelash.

After the first day, it proved impractical to do any heavy cutting or hammering of the plywood pieces there. The sawdust affected the actors' throats and the pounding disrupted their concentration. We had a hastily held conference late that afternoon, and it was decided that all the preliminary carpentry would have to be done in my Village studio and the props designed in sections with removable screws and hinges so they could be easily dismantled and reassembled.

For the next month, riders on the local Eight Avenue subway line were mildly surprised (New York commuters don't startle easily) by the appearance of a plywood treetop, or the oddly angled front end of a massive bed, or the central section of a flamboyantly paned ogive window sliding through the open car doors, with me at one end pushing or pulling and, likely as not, Arthur at the other end doing the same. We hauled most of the scenery that way. It was far too cumbersome for taxis and impossible to get up the narrow steps and around the coin boxes of buses. There was one piece, however, that defied every means of motorized transport. At the last minute, it was decided to include a seven-foot cut-out of my poster design in the show. It was a totem-like affair—from the bottom up, a base formed by inverting Uncle Sam's head wearing his signature stovepipe decorated with stripes and stars; it was cut off just below the mouth and butted up to a similarly cutoff, upright silhouette profile of Junebug's head; Uncle Sam's had features like eyes, mouth, beard, drawn in, but Junebug's was a solid black, featureless profile with slightly parted lips and indications of kinky hair above; on top of that, a tiny full figure of America lounged seductively, twirling a strand of Junebug's hair in one hand and staring out at the viewer from under her Statue of Liberty coronet. I hadn't time to design it to be collapsible, so after the easel-style backing was added, we had to carry it by hand all the way from Waverly Place and 7th Avenue to 29th Street and 9th Avenue. I had to wait until Arthur came home from work to start out. And when we did, a cold blustery wind had come up to hamper activities. Each time we stopped to rest, the sheet that enshrouded it to protect the finish would unravel in the gusts and flap like a flag across the sidewalk, slapping passersby in the face and causing traffic snarls when crossing streets. Then, our luck, just about 22nd Street, Arthur had to go to the bathroom so badly (nerves?) that when we reached the 23rd Street subway entrance, we had to quickly prop the thing against the railing while he dashed downstairs,

and I flattened my body against it, spread-eagle, to keep it from taking off. When he returned, it took both of us to extricate my head from the tangle of sheet that developed in his absence. By that time, we were both exhausted and testy from fighting the wind. We continued the rest of the route with the shroud trailing off behind us like Isadora Duncan's fateful scarf. It no longer mattered whether it protected the surface or not. To hell with it! We just wanted to get the damn thing delivered.

When we got all the props to the parish house, they were stacked against the walls and eventually glued, screwed, and painted before the watchful supervision of the entire company. Acknowledging my existence at last (a few of them even said some of the designs were nice), they evolved into picky, coffee-break experts on every phase, remembering how similar things were done in other shows they'd been in—usually better and more efficiently, but seldom able to be specific when I called their bluff. For the most part, the criticisms were given good-naturedly, and I realized they were a way to ease the tedium that accompanied the long waits in rehearsals for blocking, script changes, and, in this case, instantaneous switches in direction. In the ensuing weeks, a camaraderie blossomed. It wasn't long before they began to emerge as more than characters in a play. Even the elusive Mr. Perkins got into the act, so to speak, and took to holding pieces in place while I screwed them together. We discussed carpentry mostly (he was installing some shelves he wanted advice about), but there were still times when I'd turn around to pick up a fresh screw from the box he held and find he was down the stairs and out of the building. Not for nothing had we dubbed him the resident spook. Moses Gunn (Muslim) had the keenest interest in what I was doing. Sometimes he hung around after rehearsals and we'd discuss art, on which he was very knowledgeable, and making things; woodworking had always fascinated him, but he never seemed to have time to devote to it. His tall, thin frame, deeply etched brown face, and beard shot through with grey flecks gave him an ancient, ascetic appearance. His voice was his most outstanding characteristic, however; even in ordinary conversation, it resonated from some deep internal pipe organ with all the stops out. Onstage, it was capable of projecting an unnerving, timber-rattling bellow; his delivery was also unique in that he spoke quickly and in a slurred manner, making listeners prick up their ears to catch all the words. It lent his speeches a tossed-off quality that sometimes came across as disdain, serving him well in this role, and ones in Joseph Papp's Shakespeare in the Park series, such as *TITUS ANDRONICUS* and *OTHELLO*. He was the eldest of seven children of a St. Louis laborer and majored in drama at Tennessee State University. After arriving in New York, he appeared in Genet's *THE BLACKS* in 1962 (for fifteen dollars a week!) and eventually helped found The Negro Ensemble Company. With it, he won several of a host of Obie Awards for Distinguished Performance, among them *DADDY GOODNESS* (1968) by Richard Wright and *THE FIRST BREEZE OF SUMMER* (1975) by Leslie Lee. He had movie roles in "The Great White Hope," "Ragtime," and the award-winning TV mini-series "Roots" for which he won an Emmy. Just before *JUNEBUG* opened, I presented him with a set of colored renderings of the costumes and sets in gratitude for his kindness. He was overwhelmed.

My "prop shop" was the best seat in the house for monitoring the goings-on about the room. Dead center was where main scheduled rehearsals took place; like a wheel hub, everything radiated from there. A call to the sewing machine area, for example, brought one of the seamstresses running with an unfinished bit of costume, threads trailing like the tentacles of a jellyfish, to test how it would "play" in a certain scene; musicians were summoned from their huddle to run through a newly composed bit of music with the cast; and a prop that was being worked on would be temporarily requisitioned so that action could be "blocked" around it.

When the actors were not on, they tended to cluster in the same spots along the wall in the same cliques. The older actresses sat apart, demurely knitting and spinning reminiscences of past performances. The two younger women, Rosalind Cash and Marilyn Chris, often sat with their heads together by the window in muffled giggles, murmuring anecdotes of a younger generation.

Rosalind (Sonja) had a beautiful face and figure (too classy for the role of a cheap hooker), and she moved

with an ease that bordered on slink. Her mellifluous singing voice recalled honeyed cambric tea on a cold winter night, and her broad smile accentuated her prominent cheekbones and sensuous lips. Besides being gorgeous and an accomplished singer, she was a fine actress, and for her age, had already racked up an impressive variety of appearances: the touring company of NO STRINGS, the City Center revival of FIORELLO, THE WAYWARD STORK on Broadway, and the Hyde Park Playhouse mounting of A RAISIN IN THE SUN. Besides that, she had had singing engagements at the Village Vanguard and Café Au Go Go and was featured in such television “soaps” as Guiding Light, Search for Tomorrow, and Look Up And Live. It was heartening to find that she had continued to expand her scope over the years when, in late spring 1991, she was hailed in print for her outstanding performance as the richest woman in the world in Chicago’s Goodman Theater production of Friedrich Durrenmatt’s classic, THE VISIT.

Cash and Marilyn Chris (America) had something in common besides relative youth: they both had appeared in featured roles in the television series The Nurses. Marilyn had also appeared on Broadway as Lois in THE OFFICE and as Gena in the Paramount film LOVE WITH THE PROPER STRANGER. As a member of the Living Theatre, she played roles in New York and around Europe for four years in such plays as Jack Gelber’s THE APPLE, IN THE JUNGLE OF THE CITIES, and MANY LOVES.

To the dark-blond pertness and standard baby-doll cuteness of the stereotyped ingenue, she added slightly coarse features and an off-the-street manner that, when the play got rough, gave her reading of America as a shopworn bimbo-turned-classic-tragic heroine (in the striptease scene especially) a riveting reality. She also came off with the best reviews after the play opened. In a generally unflattering piece in *The Village Voice* of March 2, 1967, the reviewer cited three actors, however, whom he felt transcended the material: Moses Gunn, John Coe, and Chris, continuing that the director, Kalfin, had settled for a soap opera level of acting that rendered the piece flat, lacking the flexibility to encompass all of Shepp’s wild extremes of expression. He added that Chris managed to surpass the mundane staging with a full-rounded reading of America, as did a capsule review in *Back Stage* on Friday, March 10, 1967, that also said she stole the show—not easy to do with the likes of excellent performers like John Coe, Rosalind Cash, and Moses Gunn. Kalfin fared better in the latter review which said he led his cast with skill and contrast; it called the largely Negro company lusty and spirited and noted the admission was free, so what could go wrong?

John Coe was the elder statesman of the troupe, and true to his role, the surrogate father of us all. He, too, had been a member of the Living Theatre and appeared with Chris in THE JUNGLE OF THE CITIES and THE APPLE in the first two of its European tours. On Broadway, he appeared in Paddy Chayefsky’s THE PASSION OF JOSEPH ID and had left the starring role in the world premiere of THE WICKED COOKS by Gunter Grass to be in JUNEBUG.

His small stature belied a formidable voice and strong physical projection that was as versatile as it was effective. It was in the role of Uncle Sam, with fake goatee and bushy eyebrows, that I always pictured him later in mental flashbacks because an accident involving him in character triggered the eruption of a volcanic situation that had been rumbling for some time and precipitated my downfall as the new white hope of American scenic design. Relations between Bob Kalfin and the rest of us began deteriorating the first week of February. Gripping was heard over my chair-wall, first as one or two isolated complaints, then as a growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction. Most of it stemmed from Kalfin’s continued “assumptions.” Actors related incidents of feeling intimidated and confused when he suddenly berated them for not “knowing” his intentions, which for the most part had never been indicated clearly in the first place. I suggested that maybe his actions reflected frustration at not being able to elicit the kind of play he envisioned from Archie Shepp. They were struggling to give it the form of a jazz composition, but jazz musicians create something new each time they pick up instruments. That’s the essence of the medium. Anything short of a totally improvisational approach would fail to capture it, and that required another kind of training and another kind of company.

I also thought it might have been that the failure was becoming evident to Kalfin at last, and in his relative

inexperience (this was his first fully staged production, after all), he simply didn't know what to do about it and was laying the blame on the cast and crew. The playwright wasn't much help at that stage either. He seemed to be as confused as the rest of us about the direction his play should be taking after the multiple changes and start-overs imposed by Kalfin's scalpel. Shepp seemed happiest in the company of the other musicians—pianist Stanley Cowell, percussionist Sunny Murray, and bass Teddy Smith. Their corner of the kingdom was nearest the prop shop, and it was pleasant listening to their easy banter, which was a cryptic mumbo-jumbo that wasn't always intelligible. The word "man" replaced all the punctuation marks at the beginning, middle, and end of sentences and an amazing range of nuances was extracted from repeated use of a prolonged "Sheeeeeeeeeee-it!"

He never developed the same rapport with the rest of the company. In fact, he spoke directly to me only once, when he came upon me one morning on the floor on all fours, painting a flat. Leaning over my head, he whispered hoarsely, "I dig your work, man. It's good. Bright. Colorful. I like that, man." Then he gave my shoulder a light squeeze and rejoined the boys in the band.

Before he became a fulltime musician, Shepp taught in the New York Public Schools, worked for the Department of Welfare, and counseled teenagers at the Mobilization of Youth. Observing him from my private box, I concluded that here was a highly intelligent, perceptive man who, as rehearsals progressed, was becoming painfully aware of his limitations as a playwright but continued to persevere for the sake of the company and all the elements invested in the project. Bearish in appearance, bearded, and often sporting a rakish tam-o-shanter on his closely cropped hair, he was, at first glance, the quintessential jazz groover among the other players. But closer to, his eyes betrayed the restive thinker—hooded coals always on the move, perceiving, evaluating, assimilating.

Shepp's mentor was the famed saxophonist/composer John Coltrane. He had already recorded several albums of Coltrane's music that included the composer's signature "sheets of sound" arpeggios and expressions of sheer abandonment to ecstasy and pain—what contemporaries would soon refer to as "Coltrane's Spirituality." His technique of stripping away harmonic limitations so that soloists could improvise freely and passionately before returning in long, loose arcs to the original melodic structure was what Shepp tried to adapt to his writing.

The big blow-up occurred late on Saturday afternoon a week before the opening. It followed two incidents in succession, and the day and time were significant. The first was during a run-through of the second act hotel scene with Sonja and her john. The bed had been assembled and tromp l'oeil-ed to look realistically disheveled, including a painted wooden pillow. After the love-making episode, Rosalind Cash threw her legs over the side and sat up to begin her musical lament. She attempted to cross her leg and, instead of singing, let out a god-awful scream. The musicians stopped playing, and everyone in the room turned to stare. It was before pantyhose, and her legs were bare. In shifting from one haunch to the other, she'd rubbed against a rough spot on the edge of the plywood, and it hurt. She immediately stood up and pressed a finger here and there under her shapely bottom.

"Bob," she insisted, "I'm sorry, but I can't sit on that. The edge is full of splinters, and I wouldn't dare move around on it. You'll have to do something."

Kalfin ran his finger over the edge of the bed and said through his teeth, "Donn Russell, you never finished the edges off on that prop, did you?"

"Well," I replied, "I sanded it all before I painted it, like I do with my sculptures. It felt smooth to me."

"I said *finished* it." His voice was heating up. "I *assumed* you knew the edges of anything that actors have to come in contact with have to be covered completely. TAPED. Get it? *Then* painted. I *assumed* you could've

figured that out for yourself, Russell.”

He was trying to shout, but his voice had no resonant volume and came across as a whining bleat. Of *course* I didn’t know about taping edges. I’d never done anything like that before. But bleat or bellow, his words first embarrassed me (for appearing so blatantly unprofessional in the eyes of the company) then made me increasingly angry as he began turning what should have been a corrective order into a public rebuke. *It wasn’t as though the actress had an ass full of slivers that had to be surgically removed, for God’s sake, I thought, so what’s the big deal here?*

Most likely, he was getting even for my refusal earlier in the week (as Foundation director) to cough up emergency funding he claimed was desperately needed to get through opening night. He had gone dangerously over budget, as anyone with ears could attest from David Long’s screaming more and more frequently at him behind closed office doors on the top floor. I carefully explained to him again our policy of one grant per project, but he couldn’t understand why this wasn’t an exception since I was so closely involved. (Eventually, “friends of CTC,” which included Harold Prince, Jerome Robbins, Bobby Short, Leonard Bernstein, Nancy Hanks, Morris Ernst, and the elusive but generous Anthony Perkins, among others, provided the additional resources.)

There was a long pause while the air filled with the sound of beating wings. Behind my fragile barricade, I stood dumbfounded and defenseless but fuming. At length, I apologized aloud and muttered something about fixing things right away. Someone tossed a coat over the contaminated area, and the rehearsal resumed with Kalfin keeping his nose in the script and avoiding looks in my direction.

At the break following the scene, while the crew replaced the bed with the cut-out for the Epilogue, everyone slumped into chairs, exhaling the pent-up tension. They also refrained from staring at me, but it was obvious I remained the center of attention.

The cut-out was set in place before the low box that served as a platform for Uncle Sam and America to climb up onto in order to get their heads through the openings. They gingerly mounted it and grasped the handles that had been attached to the back of the panel for balance. With their heads thrust through the holes, the scene commenced, and, to everyone’s relief, continued without incident until Uncle Sam’s speech where he proves he is the same character as that shown on the front of the panel no matter how anyone tries to disguise him.

John Coe jumped off the box too quickly, and his hand got caught in the handle, yanking him backwards. He thrust one foot back for balance, and it grazed a renegade nail protruding about half an inch from the end of the box. He was in his red, white, and blue underpants costume with socks held up by blue garters. The nail ripped a gash around the outer calf of his leg. Blood oozed immediately and coursed down the sock and onto his shoe. As in most minor accidents, it looked worse than it was. But that didn’t ease my situation at the moment. After what had already transpired that day, my nerves were frazzled, and I was on the verge of just giving up. Now this, with blood everywhere. Oy! I grabbed an old tee shirt used for wiping paint stains and fashioned a crude tourniquet above the wound, praying God make it stop! John Coe was visibly shaken. But when three or four other performers came to assist him, he began limping toward the stairs, leaning heavily on them to milk maximum sympathy. It seemed to be hours before they descended to the kitchen and washed and dressed the wound. I wondered if his helpers had volunteered partly to avoid the repeat altercation that they knew was about to take place. Shaken myself, I leaned on a window sill with head in hand. Marilyn Chris, still behind the cut-out with her head in the hole, rolled her eyes heavenward and moaned, “Oh, dear God, not again!”

Kalfin seethed silently for a long minute, then let me have it, beginning slowly and building steadily to a great crescendo: “How COULD you? Are you some kind of idiot, not even thinking to check for nails you yourself hammered into the props? I *assumed* anyone would have the sense to do that. I just can’t believe this...”

Blah, blah, blah. My mind clicked off the harangue, and, as all too often happens when I'm confronted this way, my perverse sense of humor took over. In my mind, I switched to an amusing incident I witnessed a few days earlier. On upper Fifth Avenue, a limousine slowed to the curb alongside me. The driver got out and opened and held the back door as a smartly dressed middle-aged woman emerged, feeling for the ground with an expensively shod foot. When she stood up and was about to step up onto the sidewalk, she looked down and gasped in horror, "Oh, shit! Doggy-doo-doo." She had landed directly into a steamy blob that looked substantial enough to be dropped by an elephant from across the street in the park zoo. The driver, and by this time the doorman, grabbed her elbows and lifted her onto the curb. With a look of agony on her face, she hobbled between them into the apartment house lobby, her shitty foot only touching base each step on the point of the toe, as if she'd broken an ankle.

The smile of recollection spreading across my face must have rekindled Kalvin's ire, for when I came back to reality, he was red from ranting.

"...and I want every inch of every prop taped, retaped, and countertaped. And I want it done immediately. We start dress rehearsals in the church tomorrow right after Sunday morning mass, and I want them ready by then. Is that perfectly clear?"

I nodded yes and said I'm sorry once more and pretended to do something very detailed on the bench, thinking, *Listen you asshole, I've worked damned hard and long on your frigging play and paid for it besides. For this? Some reward! So I made a mistake. I'll fix it. It isn't the end of the world. Big deal!*

As he continued to rant, I interrupted him, saying in an icy half-whisper that I didn't think it was necessary to scream so loudly. No one was deaf there and, believe it or not, I understood the seriousness of the situation all too well and would be happy to begin rectifying it as soon as his tirade ended.

With that, he gulped back his next word, dropped his shoulders a few inches, and stared at me in disbelief, shaking his head from side to side.

"I only *assumed*..." he began again, then thought better of it and, instead of finishing the sentence, turned quickly and headed downstairs to check on the condition of our country's uncle.

I didn't waste any time grabbing my jacket and cap and quietly tiptoed after him, but instead of turning right at the first floor, I continued on out into the early evening gloom.

It wasn't until I hit the street and noticed all the CLOSED signs about that I realized it was after 6:00 P.M., and no hardware or art store would be open to sell me masking tape. In a relative panic, I rushed over to Eighth Avenue while racking my brain for a solution. Every shop I passed was dark except for a few Puerto Rican food stores, so when I reached the avenue, I turned south toward the brighter lights of 23rd Street. Passing an all-night drug store, it suddenly came to me: Band-Aids. Brilliant! But would I ever find enough to cover all the jagged edges and pesky nails? A revolving door never spun so quickly. In a flash, I found the First Aid section and scooped up all the packages of rolled surgical tape and boxed bandages I could find, any size or shape, and lugged them in several armloads to the checkout. The manager happened to be behind the counter at the time, doing the day-end tallies, and he deftly rang up every item I threw down without comment or even a bat of the eye. When he finished, he stuffed them into shopping bags and pushed them forward. Only as he handed me the change did he break his silence to ask, dry as punk, "Cut yourself shaving, sir?"

Back at the parish house, the cast and crew had left, and the empty rehearsal hall seemed as exhausted and daunted from all the recent emotional upheaval as I. It was a relief, though, not to have anybody around to remind me further. I folded away the chair barrier so the props could be spread flat all across the floor. The repair job took over six hours from the first taped and repainted bedside to the last triple-bandaged bent nail. But determination kept me going. I worked in a frenzy without stopping; all the pent-up rage and shame seeped out along with sweat in a kind of liberating catharsis. I no longer felt corseted by someone else's per-

ceptions, and at one point burst into a spontaneous little dance of celebration to regained freedom. Through trial and error, I'd learned I wasn't the person who could readily repress his own individuality for the good of the company. I was no team player and couldn't follow the leader. I'd been a loner too long. Each bandage application bolstered my resolve that this was going to be my last attempt. I crisscrossed and crosscrissed the tapes with abandon until the backs of the props looked like latticed islands on a vinyl-tiled sea.

About 2:30 AM., tired and giddy with self-revelation, I picked up all the empty little boxes that were strewn about and began pitching them, one by one, at the big trash bin by the door. In no time, it was heaped to overflowing and resembled a Red Cross disaster center after a night of bloody rioting.

Finally the props were picked up and leaned back against the walls, heavier, but no longer lethal. The cover of the tool box clicked shut on remembered incidents, some good, and as the electric hand drill was being rolled up, a folded note fell out of the jumbled cord. It had a penciled two-word message of hope and support from an anonymous, tongue-in-cheek well-wisher that suddenly put it all back into perspective again. It read:

COURAGE, CAMILLE

I laughed myself home, fingers weeping.

JUNEBUG GRADUATES TONIGHT! opened February 20, 1967. I missed it. In fact, I hadn't been near the place since the all-night Florence Nightingale routine. Frustration, embarrassment, and humiliation all probably had something to do with it, but, once the unequivocal decision was made not to pursue stage craft as a career, I found myself treating the project like I did a finished painting—I simply stopped thinking about it and set my mind to something else. It was a relief to know that it was not a shattered dream but only a burst bubble. Jo Mielziner (the great designer whose unforgettable settings ranged from AFTER THE FALL to GYPSY to SUMMER AND SMOKE to DEATH OF A SALESMAN) would have to wait for another young upstart to challenge his crown.

David Long telephoned me soon after the opening to thank me for all my efforts on behalf of the entire company and urged me to see a performance, "just to close the book on the whole experience." So I chose the final night's show and dragged Arthur and four other gullible friends along to share it. The first thing to catch the eye on entering the nave was the "Frontispiece" totem-like cut-out of Uncle Sam's inverted head balancing Junebug's silhouetted one with America sprawled on top. It had been placed in the center aisle on the way to the closed brown stage curtain and looked disappointingly insignificant with the vast church space around it; in the cramped quarters of the parish house, it loomed like an ogre. Junebug's curly black head disappeared into the acres of corduroy drapery, and Uncle Sam's stovepipe hat was lost below the pew level when you sat down. I knew it was a dud when one friend stage-whispered, "What the hell is *that* thing?"

The church had very nearly filled up to capacity, however, and we had to all split up into single seats. The audience was unruly and excited with anticipation; it might have been a bull fight or a street fair. Youngsters kicked the backs of seats and older teenagers popped gum loudly and beat tattoos on the carved oak armrests of the pews with bunches of metal keys. Up front, there were several rows of neatly dressed elderly citizens from the housing project, the men already nodding off in the heat of the room, and the ladies tugging impatiently at the temple tabs of their wigs or pressing out the laps of their next-best frocks with nervous fingers. A gang of sullen types clad in leather hunched together at the rear like vultures, eying everything warily and fussing with their ducktails.

When the curtains parted and the musicians and actors came onstage to take their places, there were loud comments in several languages along with whistles and Bronx cheers from the crowd. Two vultures broke into a fight over some unseen slight, and one of the musicians had to raise a hand to quiet things down. Kal-fin's dream of popular theater seemed to have become a resounding reality.

As the play progressed, the most notable change was in the music: songs were fewer and shorter, becoming mere exclamation marks to themes already developed in speech, instead of the sinuous, pulsating threads that ran through the work in the beginning linking the disparate scenes seamlessly. For a work billed as a “jazz allegory,” there was no longer much jazz left in it, and, aside from Uncle Sam and America, damn little allegory. Even the individual speeches, although ably spoken by the cast, came off as tedious, unrelenting harangues, reminding me that Shepp was a close associate of LeRoi Jones and had joined him on various occasions in angry musical/poetic diatribes at the Village Vanguard night club. Somewhere between the parish house and the church nave, all the early subtlety and humor had drained away.

Critics took the usual pot shots at the production, one calling it an activist play watered down to a complacent milieu; another likened it to a Brechtian cabaret without the style; yet another dismissed it as one-sided and non-contributive to dialogue. For myself, I was able to revert back to my role of Foundation director in spite of the recent disaster and determined that if I had been looking at this group for the first time to evaluate it for my board of directors, I would certainly have recommended it for future funding. The staging, direction, and appealing costumes were more than merely interesting. As for the stage set, probably the less said, the better (as was the case with the reviewers, only one of whom, Robert Pasolli, made mention of it, and then only to say the flashy use of color helped energize the proceedings). My friends, for the record, excused themselves at intermission to go for drinks and never returned. During the Epilogue, I held my breath as John Coe stepped from behind the large cut-out in his patriotic underwear. There was a thick bandage still on his leg, and he limped noticeably but carried on in traditional high style. I sighed audibly and became lost in the moving and very compassionate final moments of the play, along with most of the other viewers.

Robert Kalfin wrote me several months later, asking again for funds. But that time it was strictly business, and the letter was addressed, “Dear Mr. Russell.” It detailed the recent activities of the Chelsea Theater Center as if I’d been on the moon all the while, and continued, “As a direct result of JUNEBUG, Chelsea Theater Center has been asked to apply, and is under active consideration, for funding for full workshop productions by the National Endowment for the Arts.

“The controversy caused by the production led to nationwide publicity through the article that appeared in *The Nation*. There have subsequently been offers to revive the play in Harlem, Off Broadway, and for European production. As director of the theater, I have recently received a grant to pursue leads for JUNEBUG’s presentation in Scandinavia and will be leaving for Stockholm within the next few weeks. This grant is also for the purpose of my pursuing CTC’s goal of an international exchange program of the work of young writers and directors.”

It ended with “Thank you for your interest. Yours sincerely, Robert Kalfin.”

Aside from his rather short memory, our goals had certainly been accomplished. CTC was gaining wider recognition and was now in line for more substantial national and local government funding.

Kalfin moved CTC to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1968 and changed the name to Chelsea Theater Center of Brooklyn, replacing David Long with Michael David as executive director. It occupied an upper level space that was magically reinvented for each production. In time, he learned to handle staff and performers more sensitively, and in turn was rewarded with some stunning work in notable productions that were among the very best Off Broadway. In ten years, he produced over one-hundred plays including KASPAR by the German playwright Peter Handke; Jean Genet’s THE SCREENS (a five-hour long, forty-character work about colonialism in Arab countries); THE BEGGAR’S OPERA, and POLLY, two rollicking revivals by John Gay; ‘CADDISH, a dramatization of the poem about his mother by Allen Ginsberg; SLAVESHIP by LeRoi Jones; and his most memorable success of all, CANDIDE by Leonard Bernstein.

Originally written in 1956 in collaboration with Lillian Hellman and Richard Wilbur, the musical built up a cult of admirers mainly through the cast album that continued to be a success long after the seventy-three performances the piece played on Broadway. The revival had a new book by Hugh Wheeler, still based on

Voltaire, and new lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and John Latouche. The director who restaged it was none other than Harold Prince. He enlivened the sophisticated satire with a carnival-like air as he moved Candide through his searches for good in the face of evil that constantly confronted him at every turn, and then placed him back in his own little garden again, disillusioned but wiser, and more hopeful, about human nature.

Prince used literally every inch of the theater (including the ceiling) for the action, seating the audience in clusters in the midst of it all. It was such a success at the CTC that it was moved to Broadway (at the Broadway Theater) and received a resounding reaction during the 1973-1974 season.

In 1973, Kalfin and David opened an “annex” in another empty church on Manhattan’s 43rd Street with two upstairs theaters designed to take shows after their runs ended in Brooklyn. It was christened the Westside Theater and also boasted a downstairs cabaret, “Brooklyn Navy Yard,” that offered food, drinks, and performance artists.

They split up in 1978, and each formed his own company. David’s stayed at BAM under the name Dodger Theater. Its first production was GIMME SHELTER by the young British playwright Barrie Keefe. Kalfin kept the original name and moved operations to the Westside. He imported two foreign works for his first year, BIOGRAPHY: A GAME, by Max Frisch, and STRIDER: THE STORY OF A HORSE, an adaptation of a Tolstoy allegory written and directed by Kalfin himself.

In Manhattan, the CTC lasted another two years, then folded after the 1980-1981 season’s production of HIJINKS!, a musical rendition of Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines, written by Kalfin, Steve Brown, and John Kinney. After that, Kalfin continued freelancing as a director and theater advisor from his New York base.

In its long and fruitful life, the Chelsea Theater Center chalked up numerous awards including nineteen Obies, five Tonys, as well as Drama Desk and Outer Circle Awards. In later years, Bob Kalfin and I conversed by phone as if nothing untoward had ever happened between us that fateful winter in 1967. Lesson learned: anyone involved in the intense, day-to-day development of a theatrical venture can expect to be, in turn, vilified, belittled, overruled, ignored, ridiculed, rebuked, or humiliated. But it’s nothing personal.

Chapter Five

Short Takes

1966-1973

The decade or so that spanned the mid-sixties to mid-seventies saw the full flowering of avant-garde theater, dance, and film-making activity in New York. What happened before was introduction—after, mostly echoes in the wind. Ideas all seemed new, and risks were still affordable. A dream was enough to build a company on, and there were dreams to spare. Every Sarah Lawrence graduate seemed to produce her own modern dance company, with father, mother, aunts, and uncles listed prominently among the sponsors on the back page of the programs. Yale Drama School sophomores took their first winter projects to Europe's summer festivals and were hailed as seasoned veterans who had kept their refreshingly youthful naiveté. Young explorers stalking the jungles of the lower East Side with movie camera and unjaundiced eye were acclaimed for putting the *verité* back in cinema. Eventually, there were so many doing so many things that they had to practically stand on top of each other to take off. The beating of all those gossamer wings in so many directions was bound to produce casualties, but for the moment it filled the air with a lovely iridescent breeze. The time was now, and the future was today tomorrow.

For the director of a fledgling theater foundation that was not yet focused on its priorities, it was like trying to balance a canoe on a turbulent pond while feeding all the ducks that swam up within reach. Encouraged by the stunning debut of The American Place Theatre, we began scattering our meager largess in ever-wider arcs over the performing arts waters, expecting some kind of loaves-and-fishes reaction, but found instead that in many cases our help was too little too late. Much of the surrounding theatrical wildlife was already endangered by its very nature, but even some of the sturdier-looking specimens, on closer look, seemed to be nearing extinction by the time we reached them.

Longevity was not one of the built-in characteristics of the performing groups that proliferated during that period. For every American Place Theatre that was able to sink roots in the cultural concrete of the city, scores of others lost their footholds after only a year or two, blown away by bad luck, lack of funds, and/or public apathy. Their vulnerability was almost palpable. I learned to look toward their next projects and the next, but never too far down the road. So many times when I contemplated the fate of those little groups I was reminded of the scene from Robert Anderson's achingly poignant 1953 drama *TEA AND SYMPATHY* in which Laura, the schoolmaster's wife (Deborah Kerr), speaking to the sensitive young student Tom (John Kerr), describes her marriage to her first husband, a young serviceman who was killed in training camp during the second world war:

"We knew it wouldn't last....we sensed it. ...but, he always said, 'Why must the test of everything be its durability?'"

For those of us lucky enough to have experienced the imaginative excitement generated by those early ensembles, their recollections still glow like lights along a distant highway. Diversity was our aim back then, so we funded a broad range of performance-related activities, a sampling of which follows.

PEANUTS TO PIROUETTES

One was a small dance company I stumbled on literally by default on a dreary Monday evening in November 1966. I had been standing on First Avenue near Ninth Street in the East Village about 7:45 P.M., angrily cursing the penciled note taped to the locked door of the performing space of a theater group I was scheduled to monitor, announcing the performance that night was canceled due to a burst water pipe. By now I knew that

was the standard excuse in the business to indicate an under-rehearsed or unfinished production a director decided wasn't ready yet for public scrutiny. But what ticked me off was that no one had bothered to let me know it earlier, so a visit to another group could have been arranged. My calendar was getting steadily fuller lately and it now required about a month's advance notice to get on it, so I hated wasted nights like this. I contemplated making a mad dash to Second Avenue in the chance of getting a last-minute admission to one of the large theaters there. But a glance at my watch ruled that out. Home it would be. I walked to the next corner and turned into St. Mark's Place, knowing there would be some interesting distractions on the way across town.

St. Mark's Place was a chameleon. It began as Eighth Street at Sixth Avenue, passing the West Village's most popular stretch of night spots, all lit up like Chinese New Year; it then quieted down into a grey staid way from Fifth Avenue to Broadway, culminating under the brownstone arches of Cooper Union School of Design, in whose historic Great Hall President Abraham Lincoln once gave an address. From Third Avenue eastward it underwent a complete metamorphosis: not only did the name change to St. Mark's Place, but so did the street itself, from the nineteenth century to the psychedelic 1960s in the flash of a strobe light. Between Third and Second, the flower children of the era hung out, to shoot up or buy pot and paraphernalia, or just admire each other's nose rings and weird getups. The chameleon acquired day-glo dots as it headed east, in colors that defined the area for the next twenty years—acid green purple and pukey yellow. Beginning at the St. Mark's Hotel at the corner of Third, where rooms were available for ten bucks a night, the excitement picked up with, next, the notorious, but carefully guarded St. Mark's Baths, then a morass of tiny vending operations, some legal, set up along both sidewalks on old chenille bedspreads and folding tables to offer everything from second-hand records to stolen books, to used clothing and leather S & M. Tie-dyed t-shirts and skirts floated from trees like conquerors' triumphant pennants. The crowning touch at the Second Avenue intersection was a broad display of black sweatshirts emblazoned with slogans that stuck a tongue out or a middle finger up at society, framed by incongruous peace symbols and the intertwined letters L-O-V-E.

Once across Second Avenue, the colors quieted back down to brick, grey, and black, as St. Mark's Place regressed in time again, passing the last strongholds of immigrant America: the Ukrainian Social Center, the Polish Democratic Club, an Italian storefront meeting place; and even more permanent indications of settlement—religious centers such as the Church of St. Cyril, run by Franciscan Fathers and boasting a Slovenian information service, and the First German Methodist Episcopal Church in the center of the block (which in time, because of economic strictures or dwindling congregation, or both, welcomed into its fold a Spanish Iglesia Metodista Unida and a Japanese Jujitsu Center in the basement).

By the time it got to where I stood on the corner of First Avenue, it was a cross street like all the others in the neighborhood, reaching out for one more block to end under the shade trees of Tompkins Square Park.

Just in from First Avenue, heading west, an interesting architectural grouping caught my eye: the temporary cardboard box dwellings of some street people, who were puttering around outside. A small crowd had gathered before one of them where a middle-aged black man in an accorded top hat and a vest pinned all over with found objects was coaxing a large white duck named Shakespeare to do tricks. The duck was having none of it, however, and instead waddled independently in and out of the boxes. The onlookers began walking away without reaching into their pockets for change, and the man shouted frantically and beat a stick against the side of the carton house. Shakespeare reappeared from behind and, to everyone's delight, opened its big rubbery bill and answered in a loud flatulent blast.

Backing away, but unable to keep my eyes off the funny scene, I tripped on a protruding shard of sidewalk and fell backwards, landing on my butt with a thump. Above me was an awning that led to what seemed like a small, but interesting-looking theater, and sure enough, there above the door in slanted script was THEATRE 80 ST. MARKS. I rose and peered past the plate glass and three curved steps down to the narrow black-and-white tiled hallway, and remembered that years ago it was a lively jazz club, then boarded up and

abandoned for over a decade. Now it was a newly renovated Off Broadway venue where, from the glowing press blow-ups outside, the award-winning hit musical *YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN* (an adaptation by Clark Gesner of the famous Charles M. Schulz comic strip "Peanuts") was packing them in Tuesdays through Sundays. Another placard announced that on Mondays, "dark night", its resident dance company, the Manhattan Festival Ballet, performed—alas, as it turned out, also for "peanuts." On impulse I darted downstairs to the lobby box-office window, bought a ticket, and found my seat in the auditorium moments before the house lights dimmed. (I learned later that was how most of the audience showed up—right off the street or by word of mouth. In its short lifetime, it had become a neighborhood drop-in habit, like the weekly movie. I knew within minutes after it started I'd made a find. The program was a serendipitous delight. Contemporary works by new and untried choreographers took up most of the program. But the attractive company of seventeen dancers showed classic discipline, and, sure enough, several episodes from ballets by such masters as the great nineteenth century Dane August Bournonville (done in surprisingly accurate style) topped off the evening like a taste of sherbet. The next day I set out to learn all about the company.

It was founded in 1963 by three dancers: Robert Ossorio, co-director, who danced with the de Cuevas Company for many years, and who was the main backer; Ron Sequoio, co-director and chief choreographer, and Katharyn Horne, ballet mistress, both of whom had been leading dancers with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. Finding a name was, as it turned out, the first problem for the infant troupe.

Anything with "New York" in it would be confused with the New York City Ballet; "theater" might remind people of the American Ballet Theatre. "Manhattan," however, denoted no other group specifically, and the word "Festival" was tacked on, explained Sequoio, "to give pleasure to both our audiences and our dancers."

The trio was determined to create a permanent, professional year-round company that could perform mainly in one New York theater, hoping to minimize the need for touring one-nighters around the country, which, until then, was the usual route for small dance troupes. With its seventeen members, it would be the very first (and for some time to come, the only) permanent chamber dance group performing regularly in New York.

The next step was to find a home. Ossorio discussed it with a friend, playwright Howard Otway, who had wanted to own his own theater for a long while. He promised that when he found a suitable one, the MFB could perform there on the dark nights. It was he who discovered No. 80 and learned that it had originally been a millinery shop run, interestingly enough, by the mother of the great ballerina Nora Kaye. It was near the already established Second Avenue theaters and just a few blocks from Cooper Union Art School and the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater.

Otway sold his home in order to redo the building, and after christening it Theatre 80 St. Mark's Place, opened it with one of his own plays. Keeping his promise, the Manhattan Festival Ballet was appointed resident dance company, and I had stumbled in on its initial program.

The stage of the theater presented problems to choreographers and dancers alike, and most of the new works had to be designed specifically for it. It was very wide, with an apron that sat almost directly on the laps of the first row audience, making it likely that anyone sitting there might be flicked with perspiration from dancers twirling near the edge. There were virtually no wings, only side curtains out two feet from the walls. Costumes had to be designed close to the body so performers could hide behind them without causing unsightly bulges. It was a fish bowl setup. Katharyn Horne remembered being able to see every face in the audience clearly, and had to resist the temptation to stare directly at them. It was impossible to cover mistakes, but when the dancers felt the people were with them, it was doubly and instantly gratifying.

Since they were appearing alongside *YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN*, jokes about their working for peanuts proliferated, but weren't far off the mark. Although it was true the company offered almost unheard-of year-round contracts, the term "Permanent" was not to be confused with the word "Affluent." Critic Jack Anderson wrote in the same article, "Like so many other activities on the American dance

scene, Manhattan Festival Ballet is largely a labor of love. Out of a total seasonal budget of one-hundred-thousand dollars, the dancers receive one-hundred-fifty dollars a month plus eighteen dollars fifty cents per performance, which totals approximately fifty dollars a week—the standard fee to a choreographer is ten dollars per performance...but a few choreographers have even donated permission to use their works as outright gifts to the company.” Within a year performances were selling out, and Sequoio was hailed by all the major dance critics—from Walter Terry to Clive Barnes—for his imaginative programming and choreography. Sara Tornay, who ran Tornay Management, specializing in dance companies, took over as manager and began booking the troupe in any place that would accept it, mostly in one-night stands and often without geographic regard. “Sara Tomay was a very nice lady,” Ossorio was to confide later, “but not a very practical agent. For example, she booked us into Moorehead, Minnesota, one day and Albuquerque, New Mexico, two nights later. It took us that long to drive the car and mini-bus with the sets and costumes and dancers between the two, going well over speed limits all the way. I tell you, everyone was exhausted all the times.”

When the Manhattan Festival Ballet returned to New York, its coffers were as drained as its dancers. The last tour it made was sponsored jointly by the National Endowment Fund, local sponsors and the arts councils of each participating state in a three-way split. But back home the debts mounted faster than the stacks of rave reviews, and its founders were getting those awful, pit-of-the-stomach premonitions of failure. The few backers and foundations like ours that had helped out simply weren’t enough to stave off the inevitable, even though the critics who continued to champion their efforts publicly pleaded for additional funding, warning that it would be the city’s loss if the troupe went under.

But go under it did, at least as a New York entity. Sara Tornay wrote me in June 1969 that she’d found a new home for it in Youngstown, Ohio, under the sponsorship of the local Ballet Guild. It was the first resident professional company in that state, and the deal included setting up a school of ballet for local youngsters. Her abiding wish, that “the dancers be paid regular salaries and kept together to continue the artistic growth” seemed, at last, to be granted.

Ossorio and Home quit when the move was made: he to continue the school they had already founded in New York, and perform character roles; and she to head up a new dance program in a southern college.

For Ron Sequoio, however, fulfillment was always the next town away. After a few years in Youngstown, he became disillusioned and wandered from place to place, never staying more than a few years anywhere. Finally, he returned to his hometown, San Antonio, Texas, and set up yet another dance group, that also failed. But the ultimate failure was the most ignominious—a long, debilitating illness and premature death, attributed to AIDS.

The Manhattan Festival Ballet remained alive in memory, however—an exquisite, flawless gem in a little jewel box that brightened a drab November evening and remained a source of beauty and pleasure for as long as it lasted. Who could ask more? We would fund a number of dance projects later; but this one was one of the first, and the most cherished.

★ ★ ★

DOUBLE TAKE

In the summer of 1973, I traveled to the far reaches of the Hamptons, Long Island, to a party expressly in my honor, but at which I knew no one. It was to unveil a satirical sculpture I’d been commissioned to construct to adorn one of the architectural nightmares that sprouted like mushrooms there, as one rich and famous New Yorker tried outdoing another in summer ostentation. The guests all had faces I should have recognized, but didn’t, except for the mother of the wife of the resident couple, who paid for the work. I felt uncomfortable.

Suddenly into the room overlooking the water came Cary Grant, accompanied by his daughter Jennifer.

The impact was immediate; audible gasps rippled over champagne glasses, as the usually blasé guests lost their cool and openly gave him the once-over. The hair was sterling silver by now; a few more crows had trampled the outer edges of the amused dark eyes; the cleft in the chin was more deeply defined. But all had to concur: Cary Grant, at any stage of decomposition, was still a knock-out.

We were introduced, and chatted briefly as he politely admired the sculpture. Then the hostess, with stop-watch eyes, led him away, and I was relegated to the periphery of a celebration I was never really a part of. I stood on the stairs watching him deftly maneuver through the crowd like a river pilot who knew where all the rocks were. His finesse was impeccable. But as I continued looking, my eyes began playing tricks on me, and soon everything took on surreal proportions: he was the only person in living color, the others, black-and-white celluloid images. The reverse perceptions kept me amused for a while, not the least because I was sure that kind of scenario was never one the producers intended.

Mr. Grant and I both left early, and I later regretted not having time to ask him about his own Greenwich Village days when he shared digs with two other young actors in a flat over the Cherry Lane Theatre, trying to get a start in show business. I would also have liked to tell him that just a few months before our meeting, at the behest of Ed Emshwiller, we helped sponsor a project of the American Film Institute in its continuing mandate from the National Endowment for the Arts to “preserve the heritage and advance the art of film and television in America.” It was an Alfred Hitchcock Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, that prominently featured Grant in one of his most illustrious films, “Notorious” (1946), co-starring Ingrid Bergman and Claude Rains. Although he seemed to need no immediate preserving, it was nice to know that his work would last well into the future with the conservation project.

The American Film Institute successfully preserved more than nine-thousand-five-hundred American films in the Library of Congress eventually, saving them from being destroyed or scattered unindexed to unknown warehouses. By 1973, however, its director, George Steven, Jr. (son of the celebrated film director of such classics as “Shane” and “A Place in the Sun”) was coming under severe attack from both inside and outside the industry for neglecting young independent film makers in favor of the Hollywood establishment, making poor judgments in funding, and generally alienating potential benefactors. Concerning a two-year film making program at Greystone, the California mansion/headquarters that never enrolled over thirty-seven, critics claimed too much money (public money) was being squandered on too few recipients. Another program, in which we participated, was the issuing of grants to one hundred students and independent professionals for making private films, and, in addition, creating internships by which fifty young film makers were allowed to work closely on films being made by established producers and directors.

John Culkin, executive director of the Center For Understanding Media, resigned from the Institute’s board of trustees, charging it had “not adequately represented the field it was funded to do. The academic community has been isolated. So have the sources of private funds—a lot of it has to do with the performance of George Stevens.” A number of staff members also criticized Steven’s leadership and priorities. There were successions of internal upheavals, and some of the Washington-based Film Institute research department resigned in protest, claiming “an arbitrary and insolent administration” had neglected important scholarly research.

This festival, then, was part of a three-week celebration of the Institute’s opening of a new theater at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, designed by Stevens to show his critics what he had accomplished in five years. But that, too, ran into difficulty. A new controversy arose at Stevens’ cancellation at the last minute of the film “State of Siege” (1972) by Greek-born Constantin Costa-Gavras. His reasoning was that the film’s theme was inappropriate for that particular occasion; but others felt the cancellation was based on the film’s severe criticism of United States foreign policy.

After reading an account of the lavish one-hundred-twenty-five-dollar-a-plate award ceremony banquet at the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles, where President Nixon presented a Life Achievement Award to the

famous director John Ford, we decided to terminate our association with the institute. I liked to think Cary Grant, remembering his Village roots, would have understood.

COMES THE MILLENNIUM

Filmmaking was the serious toy of the decade. Schools offered courses and workshops in every aspect of the medium, for credit or fun. Students found it an easy form of expression that, at least at first, escaped heavy critical assessment. Films weren't good or bad; they were what you did. There weren't yet that many acknowledged experts to separate the wheat from the chaff, so just about anybody with a camera in hand was a self-proclaimed artist.

Unlike "dancing," or "composing," or "playwrighting," that demanded intensive study, practice, and discipline before the practitioner earned the right to be called "dancer," "composer," or "playwright," merely undertaking a moving picture project for the first time was enough to be labeled a "cinematographer," and there were more young people walking around in the seventies calling themselves that than anything else. What saved it from becoming just another amateur pastime was that in its immense appeal it attracted a great number of real talents along with the easy riders. These serious neophytes demanded more of themselves and the medium, and that gave rise to places of specialized learning where ideas could be exchanged and new work aired.

Jonas Mekas was a pioneer in the field. Already a respected writer on film and the film movement for *The Village Voice*, he founded the Film Culture Non-Profit Corporation in 1966 with help from the Jerome Foundation and ours. He organized a communal workshop that included expensive equipment not readily available to the single film maker and planned lectures and demonstrations by such rising stars as Ed Emshwiller and Stan Brakhage. Emshwiller, by the way, represented the new trend of visual artists branching out into the film medium from other forms of art—painting and sculpture—and it is interesting to note that the best of the next generation of filmmakers began as fine arts majors in school.

The Film Archives, as Mekas named it, thrived in several locations in the East and West Village and finally found permanent residence in a former courthouse at 32-34 Second Avenue at Second Street, metamorphosed into the Anthology Film Archives—Downtown Cinematheque. Eventually, with the greater support of the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, it was able to document and preserve the finest of what had been produced previously in experimental film, regularly showing rare old examples as well as new work by established and burgeoning movie greats.

The Millennium Film Workshop, concentrating on the practical side of filmmaking, began life in 1967 at East Second Street with Monday through Thursday evening classes in Cinematography, Low-Budget Production, Editing, and Basic filmmaking. Friday nights were reserved for screening avant-garde work by members, who paid five-dollar dues for half a year and fifteen dollars a month for all the courses. Non-members were also welcomed to submit their films for analysis and showing. Special programs that required more space or particular equipment were mounted at Mekas' Film-Makers Cinematheque at Eighty Wooster Street in Soho (until it was closed because of theater license problems).

The Millennium shared first-floor space at Number Two with the New York Theatre Ensemble, a live performing group that staged plays there on Saturdays and Sundays and began each weekend gig by cleaning up the mess the filmmakers made during the week. The original directors, George Tennille and Gary Smith, again both artists-turned-cinematographers, kept things cooking for two years. Their expertise was in things cinematic, certainly not in matters managerial. With books in a mess, they turned over the reins to Howard Guttenplan, also a former visual artist, who, in 1969, proceeded to revitalize the organization and arrange a more business-like handling of the curriculum. Ed Emshwiller, Andy Warhol, and Japan's Takahiko Iimura, who was attaining almost legendary status and a large following in the East Village, lectured there as well—

without remuneration—and supervised workshop classes. Schedules were determined far enough in advance to attract the largest number of interested young people. Flyers were distributed everywhere and ads taken out every week in *The Village Voice* with all the pertinent details.

Guttenplan moved the Millennium to a fourth floor loft at 46 Great Jones Street (near 3rd Street between Lafayette Street and the Bowery) in an effort to expand the services and present all the film showings under one roof. It was centrally located between the East and West Village, and Great Jones seemed to be the coming center for avant-garde activities: a number of artistic organizations had recently moved to the neighborhood. Ellen Stewart had just bought a building across the street for what she hoped would be a permanent home for her nomadic experimental theater company, La MaMa.

Still working another full-time job to earn a living, Guttenplan put in an additional forty hours a week keeping Millennium alive and kicking, with only a small cadre of dedicated volunteers. The audiences sat on unforgiving wooden folding chairs in an otherwise sparse long narrow room, the walls of which had been covered with so many layers of streaky white paint they had taken on the look and texture of a bleached grotto. Between the exposed iron ceiling beams hung two bare bulbs that cast a relentless glare on the heads of the intent crowd, and painted Hitler-mustache shadows under the noses of even the prettiest faces. Two darkly enameled doors stood inches from each other at one end of the room. One led to the hallway and the other to a single toilet that teasingly boasted its unavoidable communality with two signs tacked above it—LADIES on the left, overlapped by GENTLEMEN on the right. The only concession to interior decoration was a pair of elegant black velvet drapes drawn across the center of the wall protecting the high altar of filmdom—a large, expensive picture screen.

Once audiences were seated and still, the overhead lights dimmed and the drapes were solemnly parted by hand. When the pictures started, the harsh loft space shrank to a womb-like inner sanctum with rounded edges and soft warm air, like the corner *Bijou*.

The films themselves, however, were like nothing seen at the local cinema. Some were abstract studies in chiaroscuro, totally devoid of subject or sound; others were experiments in speed and pattern that often sent me reeling with vertigo; and still others were hour-long moving picture portraits of inanimate items like chairs, with the camera never changing position and nothing at all happening in the frames (except inherent graininess and occasional passing flies). The latter tended either to send me up the wall with impatience or into a deep post-prandial slumber. Sleeping, in fact, became my biggest problem at screenings. The darkness, the cramped conditions in a room with eighty seats filled and standing space and front row cushions all occupied (and they almost always were), the body heat—all conspired to force my eyes shut. And, most embarrassing, at times like that I tended to list sideways against the shoulders of fellow viewers. Most of them knew who I was, and why I was there (but never let on), and patiently propped me up until I shuddered awake, all whispered apologies; their good natured attitude seemed to say, “Hey, nobody’s perfect, right? You support us, we’ll support you. Grants don’t grow on trees, after all.”

I tried everything to overcome the drowsiness, including sucking hard candies. But to no avail. Eventually I had to give up screenings, but, by then, important and innovative independent filmmakers from all over had become involved with Millennium, showing their work and participating in discussions with an ever-growing following of interested young insomniacs who, obviously, didn’t share my proclivities. Teachers were enlisted from nearby colleges, like Standish Lauder from Yale, Stan Vanderbeek from M.I.T., Paul Sharits from Antioch, Walter Ungerer from Goddard, and Jud Yalkut from the School of Visual Arts, among others, and their presence was very helpful to the beginners at the workshop. There were film programs featuring prominent avant-garde filmmakers from Germany and Canada, and a research library containing a growing collection of taped “Filmmaker Talks” and technical film information including clippings, reprints, and manuals covering all aspects.

Howard Guttenplan, an intense slim young man with long, thick, black hair and heavy beard, was as dedi-

cated to Millennium as anyone could be to anything. Admitting that the organization had made mistakes in the past and had been sloppily run, he became possessed with improving it. At one low point in 1971 he even donated one-thousand dollars of his own salary to help make ends meet, in spite of the fact that The New York State Council on the Arts began to recognize the important place the Millennium occupied in the cultural life of New York City (it was still the only organization of its kind anywhere in the nation) and the year before had awarded it a grant for administrative salaries and visiting filmmakers' fees. But rising equipment and supply costs, plus a ten-percent hike in *The Village Voice* advertising fees, kept the coffers depleted, even with the yearly stipend from our Foundation.

He tried to keep the membership (five dollars every six months) and workshop fees (ten dollars a month) as low as when it started, and the admission price for weekend showings remained a dollar-fifty for years in an attempt to attract the most young people possible: "....accessibility... is primarily what the Millennium is all about," he wrote in an early letter.

Through Herculean efforts and sheer tenacity, Guttenplan finally made it a self-sustaining entity. Great Jones Street didn't turn out to be the hub of the lower East Side art scene as anticipated. When Ellen Stewart and La MaMa moved again to what would become their permanent "permanent" home on East Fourth Street between the Bowery and Second Avenue, Millennium soon followed, and occupied quarters up the block. Its viewing room was a seldom used, wonderful old theater, patinaed by years of must and dust, complete with attached rows of connected chairbacks and fold-down upholstered seats. True, some were broken, others stuck, and there were enough missing to make the rows look like jack-o-lantern smiles, but their relative comfort after the Great Jones back-breakers more than made up for the move. Unfortunately, it only intensified my somnolent problem; comfort was the last thing I needed. So for years I abstained.

It seemed millenniums before I made a return visit to Millennium. When I did, another change of address had taken place. It now occupied the basement space under La MaMa's Annex on East Fourth Street—an unremarkable, but neat and utilitarian area, with stepped-back seating banked high enough to allow full sight of the large screen from every position, and so roomy and comfortable that Rip van Winkle wouldn't have bothered to arouse himself for another twenty years if he'd fallen asleep there. The important thing was that the workshop was still in business and busy as ever, and ever expanding. Howard Guttenplan remained the benevolent guardian of the gate, with only a slight dusting of grey upon his beard to indicate the passing of time.

Equally interesting was that, after almost two decades, the mostly young audience looked very much like its predecessor; apparel choices had changed little since the psychedelic sixties, only toned down. Reeboks had replaced sandals, but jeans, t-shirts and sweaters still prevailed, as did stringy hair. And the social custom of lounging on the base of the spine with knees jabbing the seat-back ahead hadn't altered an iota. Bubble gum was still evident everywhere, with the whiff now and again of expanded flavors. The program of films was as interesting, boring, exciting, tedious, lucid and confusing as ever. And, true to form, I dozed off.

★ ★ ★

THE ONE...THE ONLY...(GUESS WHO)

It wasn't the pink, rubbery mouth fixed in a wide rectangular smile that was so unsettling about her clown face. It was the eyes. Big poker chips with raisin centers, they stared blankly ahead whichever way the head turned. Sitting beside her, I could have waved a hand in front of them without getting a blink. Various described in theater journals as "cow-like," "doe-ish," "bug-eyed," or "perpetually surprised," to me they seemed more like those of a ventriloquist's dummy: Charlie McCarthy in drag. They belonged to one of the most endearing—and enduring—of Broadway's musical comedy stars, and, of course, it was all part of her

“dumb blonde” act. She’d worked it so long, it probably turned on automatically when she got in a crowd. But from my close vantage point she could have fooled me. It really did seem there was nothing behind them but a hollowed-out log.

We were table mates at a benefit luncheon in the grand foyer of a new Times Square theater not long after we’d given a grant to the New Dramatists Committee in the early 1970s. New Dramatists was an off-shoot of the Dramatists Club, formed in 1949 by Michael O’Hara with the assistance of Howard Lindsay, John Golden, and other Guild playwrights, to offer talented new writers opportunities to develop their craft in a unhurried, nurturing environment, free of commercial pressures.

The Committee originally consisted of seasoned theater artists who gave professional advice to the most promising playwrights culled from the Dramatists Guild’s roster. The first committee was headed by Lindsay, and included his producing partner Russel Crouse, along with the theatrical attorney John Wharton, Moss Hart, Richard Rodgers, and Oscar Hammerstein II.

The New Dramatists Committee really had something to celebrate in 1970. Having led a gypsy existence since its founding—first holing up in cramped quarters above the Music Box Theater, then a top floor loft on Fiftieth Street, and a workshop space on East Fourth Street—it had finally found a permanent home, a former Lutheran church at 424 West 44th Street, acquired with grants from the Sam S. Schubert Foundation and John Golden Fund. Still under construction, the nave was being transformed into a one-hundred-fifty-seat theater. On the drawing boards were a workshop and rehearsal hall, as well as office space and a library for the scripts of its playwrights.

The New Dramatists was unique among theater groups at the time in that its interest was solely in playwrights—more even than their individual plays. Letha Nims, its long-time executive director and the one most responsible for finding the new home, told Mel Gussow in a New York Times interview soon after it opened, that the New Dramatists didn’t select plays, but playwrights, and wasn’t at all interested in the one-play writer. And the selections were often sterling; they’d included Paddy Cheyefsky, William Gibson, Robert Anderson, and William Inge, and more recently Maria Irene Fornes, Israel Horowitz, Julie Bovasso, Megan Terry, Ed Bullins, Alice Childress, and Lanford Wilson.

Another unique feature was that it offered its members a free place to work with no financial strictures, and the writers were the ones who determined what kind of productions they wanted and kept all the rights. The organization was there only to love them and leave them alone, Mrs. Nims concluded. Actors were hired strictly to serve the dramatists.

Six playwrights were chosen each year from the hundreds who applied. The emphasis was on new writers, but sometimes it accepted veterans who, after dry periods or failures, needed support to get working again. The choices were made after at least two volunteers, often New Dramatists themselves, had read a play, and, to avoid preconception or prejudice of any kind, the writer’s names were temporarily removed.

Much of the funding of the group was raised at benefits like the one I attended, honoring current winners or other theater luminaries who had worked on behalf of playwrights. Private and corporate donor representatives’ names comprised the guest lists. At the celebration that day the enormous foyer was Swiss-dotted with round tables for eight, in floor-length white cloths anchored by large floral centerpieces. There was a long table, similarly decorated, at the end of the room before a raised dais for the day’s dignitaries. Ushers led us to our place cards. Every slender gold chair at my table was occupied except the one to my right. On them were pale-faced men and women, conservatively dressed, who looked as if they’d hastily taxied over from the office to be on time for what they anticipated would be a special luncheon treat. A few were exchanging time-of-day stuff, but the majority concentrated attention beyond the ceiling-high plate glass windows that panorama-ed Times Square, as if the fascinating kaleidoscopic chaos below held some universal meaning. I squirmed uncomfortably in my one good jacket and tried in vain to think of something “nine-to-five” for conversation, but couldn’t. So I stared at the empty seat next to me, wondering whose it was. Then I noticed

the place card on the table in front of it, and remembered that a celebrity hostess was scheduled to reign over each enclave. This one was hard to miss, being larger than ours and boldly printed.

“Legends are always late,” said a man in a crew cut, directly across the centerpiece, to no one in particular. “I’ve been to a lot of these. They’re always the same. There was one a coupla weeks ago. Equity Library something. Helen Hayes was my table. She never showed, but the meal was pretty good. Not like this.”

He indicated the barrel-top cardboard box in front of him like ones we all had. I’d noticed it on first being seated, but took it for some kind of token present (a gift for the giver?) and, since no others had touched theirs, left it alone. He lifted the barrel top and found it hinged to the bottom. Then we realized it was a replica of a child’s lunch pail, with compartments holding one wrapped ham-and-Swiss on rye, two large cookies, and a polished apple. Neatly tucked up inside the vaulted lid was a napkin with “The New Dramatists” emblazoned across one corner.

Guests at nearby tables were making simultaneous discoveries, and for a while the air crinkled with the sounds of unwrapping and mixed reactions. Some took the meager fare in stride and began munching away. Others looked downright disgruntled, as if to say, “We got all dolled up for school cafeteria?” One unhappy soul at the table asked our waiter (who was serving coffee in—guess what?—Dixie cups with pull-out ear handles) to bring her a knife and fork. The flustered young man—an acting student—said he didn’t think there were any. “Well, then, I refuse to eat this thing with bare hands,” she sniffed, and pushed the box away. She did take a container of coffee.

I was well into my sandwich, thinking it wasn’t bad, but would be less dry and more tasty with a little mayo or mustard, when SHE arrived. Standing behind the empty chair she loomed eight feet tall, wearing what my friends in the business (who were up to here with her act and her wardrobe by now) called her “Mais oui—May we?” outfit; a crisp white dress trimmed with navy piping, featuring a square collar like on a French sailor’s summer uniform, and a matching white beret (also like a French sailor’s) with a red pompom that, perched on her massive blonde wig, looked for all the world like a dollop of whipped cream and a cherry atop vanilla pudding. According to my sources, she’d worn the same costume at virtually every daytime public appearance since she began her phenomenal, record-breaking cross-country tour in one of Broadway’s biggest smash hits almost a decade earlier. When she sat down, I noticed her navy pumps were longer than my loafers.

Some stars are surrounded by a certain aura. Hers preceded her. You could sense her approach. When she spoke it was almost as if she were talking to herself, like she was getting off on her own resonance; or, maybe she was accompanied everywhere by a bunch of invisible harpies who kept her company and acted as a cheering section.

She perched very straight on the edge of her seat, like she wasn’t planning to stick around long, displayed her incredible vocal range in a laugh that began in a baritone and ended in her trade-mark little girl chirp, and turned on me.

“Who are YOU?” her voice poked at me like a finger. The goggle eyes, up close, were fringed by fake lashes the size and thickness of garden rakes. The pink lips opened like a conch shell, revealing a solid wall of dazzling denture.

“I’m Donn Ru...”

“Of course you are,” she cut in with a giggle like a gargle, and thrust out her chin. Playtime. “Well, what do we have hee-yah?” She’d discovered lunch. Tapping the top of the box with a pink nail, she waited to hear if anything inside tapped back. Without opening it, she turned to the crew cut and said, “Just like schoo-ul.” Gargle gargle. She half-turned to the rest of us and continued, “I ne-vah went to schoo-ul, myself. I was jus’ born one day and started touring the next.” Giggle gargle.

The table laughed. “Yey-uss, it’s true!” she insisted, and then turned again to me and pointed at my box.

“How is it?”

“Oh, not baa...”

“I ne-vah eat at these affay-yuhs.” (You and the queen of England, I thought.) “I bring my own.” She patted the carpetbag on her lap and confided in a whispered baritone, “Diet cookies!” With that, the rake over one eye fell to earth in a wink that caused a minor wind change. A dapper middle-aged man approached and touched her shoulders lightly from behind. Her head swiveled three-quarters around and bobbed like the little nodding creatures on springs in the rear windows of some autos.

“Daaaaaaah-lin’!” she cooed, back in Baby Snooks-ville. He whispered into the vanilla pudding somewhere near where an average ear would be located. “Certainly,” she answered, automatically opening up the bag and pulling out a small mirror. She made a swift, professional check of the face and hair, replaced the mirror, and stuffed the bag behind her in the seat, beaming brightly. You could almost hear her harpies chiming around her, “Looking great, baby! Looking great!” She turned up the volume on the dazzling smile again and gave us all one last clockwise sweep, asking (rhetorically) “Would y’all ska-yuse me?” Without waiting for permission, she rose, planted a glossy pink kiss on his cheek, and led him off by the hand. As they skirted the tables, her massed curls bounced high over the head of her escort, swooping low here and there to acknowledge fawning fans. At the exit, her head swiveled full round, eyes blinking back at us like an owl’s in headlights. I figured it was to memorize the return route to her satchel, so I lifted it aloft while the crewcut made an “okay” sign with his fingers to assure her the cookies were all intact. She reprised the smile, waved extravagantly, and blew us a wide collective kiss over the heads of the multitude. Then sailed triumphantly out under the arch.

“I heard she’s actually over seventy years old and, under those frothy wigs, has steel grey hair cut as short as a nun’s” the crewcut sniggered, rounding up the crumbs in front of him into a neat little mound.

“Don’t say,” someone rejoined with mock enthusiasm.

I took the apple out of the lunch box and rolled it in my hands thoughtfully. The nun part I could believe, sort of. It took that kind of devout dedication to become a great clown. And there, I thought, polishing the orb on my sleeve, went a great clown.

I hadn’t had lunch with her, exactly, but I hadn’t not either...exactly. My apple was reduced to a darkening core and all that was left of the cookies were a few crimped bits on the monogrammed napkin when I decided not to await her return. Guarding her tote bag had been a singular honor, but I figured that if it contained anything really important, she’d have retrieved it sooner. Pushing the chair it was on closer to the table, I joined the other guests who were checking their watches and making for the escalators.

That benefit (thanks, in part, to our mystery star and her colleagues) helped New Dramatists—the “Committee” had been deleted—settle into its new quarters. And, although much of the initial anticipation of creating a miracle facility had to remain a dream for many years to come, its goal to continue nurturing important nascent American playwrights was realized fully. Among its later “graduates” were Robert Schennkan (THE KENTUCKY CYCLE), John Guare (THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES), Emily Mann (EXECUTION OF JUSTICE), Joe Masteroff (CABARET), Angus Wilson (FENCES), Donald Margulies (SIGHT UNSEEN), and Lee Blessing (A WALK IN THE WOODS).

★ ★ ★

EYES THAT HEAR AND HANDS THAT SPEAK

“They paint pictures in the air, and it is a language,” said David Hays in an October 1967 *Time* interview. He was speaking of the National Theater of the Deaf, which he founded six months earlier. It was one of the most innovative and unusual groups our foundation took an interest in.

The idea of a professional theater of the deaf originated in 1958 when Hays—a noted scenic designer with an impressive list of distinguished theater credits, ranging from *THE BALCONY* to *THE TENTH MAN* to *NO STRINGS* and *MARCO MILLIONS*, and resident designer posts at such venues as the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut and the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Center—was working on the sets for *THE MIRACLE WORKER* by William Gibson, about deaf and blind Helen Keller’s breakthrough to communication under the tutelage of the indefatigable Annie Sullivan. The star of the Broadway production, Anne Bancroft, as Annie, had to learn sign language, so she arranged for help from the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York City, and its psychologist, Dr. Edna Levine. The two of them spoke of forming a professional theater made up of deaf performers, and interested the show’s director, Arthur Penn, and scenic designer Hays, but were unable to acquire government funds to get the project started, so gave up on it.

Hays attempted again in 1966, again with Dr. Levine’s assistance, with a production of Euripede’s *IPHYGENIA IN AULIS* using students from Gallaudet College, the world’s only liberal arts college for the deaf in Washington, DC. It was presented at the recently formed Eugene O’Neill Memorial Theater Foundation in Waterford, Connecticut. The production was such a success that a company was formed that, following a three-week training period, went on tour, playing twenty cities in the northeast in five weeks. The training workshop had progressed quicker than expected, for, as Hays soon found, body language was nothing novel to those performers. He later wrote, “These people have a really superb theatrical medium of their own. From the time they were kids they had to depend on acting skills to get their ideas across.”

Under the aegis of the Eugene O’Neill Memorial Foundation, of which Hays was a founding member, subsequent government funding was obtained, mostly through the good offices of Commissioner Mart Switzer of the Vocational Rehabilitation Services Administration of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and operations were moved to 1860 Broadway in Manhattan. Even though their first major grant came from the VRSA, Hays was adamant about the fact that this was not a theater for the impaired. He emphasized more than once, in letters and in conversation, that the name of the company had been very carefully chosen: It was a theater *of* the deaf, not *for*, meaning it was designed to be shared by everyone.

“This isn’t help for the handicapped,” he would stress, “these are skillful actors and so creative.”

By 1970, the troupe comprising twenty-one actors had made six national tours, playing in theaters and schools as far away as the West Coast, and two tours abroad, appearing in France, Italy, England, Yugoslavia, and Israel. In Belgrade, they met the only other professional company of the deaf in the world—that from Moscow, a far older and better subsidized organization.

“But I don’t envy them their fancy theater, one hundred members, and years of fancy repertoires. I’ll hold our work up to them anytime,” Hays boasted.

Eventually two Little Theaters of the Deaf were formed, with seven members each, because of the demand from schools for more flexible and less expensive productions. They also toured nationally and internationally with younger sets of actors and repertoires. A special school was set up to train them, with such excellent teachers as: Judith Haskill, dance; Robert Panara, theater history; Gina Blair, Hindu movement; and Bernard Bragg, Jack Sydow, and Joe Chaikin, acting.

The repertoire of the main company ran the gamut from Chekhov’s monologue, *ON THE HARMFULNESS OF TOBACCO* (directed by the world-famous mime, Alvin Epstein), to Federico Garcia Lorca’s one-act plays, to an hilarious *GIANNI SCHICCI*, an Italian *comedia dell’arte* piece spoofing the well-known opera (directed by Joe Layton of *GEORGE M* fame). It even embraced Japanese Kabuki theater with the classic *TALE KASANE*, a darkly tragic story of unhappy love and murder, staged by the director Yoshio Aoyama, as well as a new English translation of George Buchner’s *WOYZECK*.

In most of the plays non-deaf narrators spoke the words from off-stage or at the side, while the deaf per-

formers acted them out in pantomime.

It was “...not the speechless mime of Marcel Marceau,” the critic of the London Observer noted, “but something richer, more expressive, and more adaptable. The audience receives all the inflections and rhythms of spoken words, and sees them embellished and explained to an extraordinary depth.”

The National Theater of the Deaf prospered with continued federal and private backing and accumulated accolades for the next quarter century, always pushing its boundaries with exciting new work. In the 1990-1991 season, for example, it announced the addition of Russian performer Josef Schneiderman from the Moscow Pantomime Drama Theater for its production of ONE MORE SPRING, based on the Robert Nathan novel, and the NTD’s Professional Theater School continued to accept international students as it always had for its tough, concentrated, five-week programs, who in turn returned to their own countries to establish similar actor-training programs as foundations for their own theater companies.

Samuel Hirsch, the drama editor of the *Boston Herald Traveler* seemed to best sum up most viewers’ sentiments after seeing a National Theater of the Deaf performance, when he wrote on Friday the 13th of October 1967: “These are artists who live in the beautiful interior world of those who cannot hear sounds, but who listen to words and music so exquisite that to share it with them as we did... is a privilege and a profound experience.”

David Hays was the only theater director in the history of our Foundation who informed us our aid was no longer needed. In a surprisingly frank letter, he thanked us for early funding that acted to encourage other, larger funding agencies, that, along with government grants, were now keeping the company in the black; he indicated how relieved he was to be able to say “...it’s like paying off the mortgage—now our obligations are only to ourselves.”

★ ★ ★

REFLECTIONS IN A JAUNDICED EYE

(a note fragment from 1971 found in my Miscellany file)

For all their proclaimed differences, Off Broadway, Off Off Broadway and the Big B continue to share similarities, such as:

Playwrights insist on being “served

Directors want complete authority

Benefactors want to be recognized in the lobby at intermission

Actors want to be adored

Audiences want the last twenty minutes cut from the show;

They also tend to large heads and small attention spans

Theater goers don’t whisper in performances anymore—they *talk*

The press is reviled, but constantly pampered

Weekend performances bring out the worst in *everybody*

What a bad TV show has over a bad live performance is a remote switch-off

★ ★ ★

STREET SEEN

In that Miscellany file, I also kept written vignettes of things that caught my eye as I traipsed around New York. In my haste I labeled the folder “Street Seens” instead of Scenes, but never changed it; somehow the

mistaken homonym fit the quick glimpses of life on the run. Here's an example:

Emerging from the Academy of Dramatic Arts after a staged reading one afternoon, I noticed on the steps of the handsome, cream-colored brick edifice, designed in 1907 by Stanford White as the original Colony Club on Madison Avenue between Thirtieth and Thirty-first Streets, several of the young performers from the show who had changed into street clothes. One girl wore a black t-shirt sporting a two-line legend on the back:

I AM AN ACTRESS!

REALLY? WHICH RESTAURANT?

★ ★ ★

STREET SEEN

LA (AHM) BOHEME

It was the closest lower Fifth Avenue got to being a remote Siberian outpost. An early weekend blizzard had dumped eight to ten inches of new snow on top of an already crusted underlayer. Overnight plows had formed unbroken dunes along the sidewalks and around corners, obliterating all the access paths carved out of the previous storm. The newly fallen layer had a quieting effect on the neighborhood, along with the fact that it was Sunday morning and what little traffic there was usually had been scared off by the weather.

I entered the avenue from Tenth Street and walked to the middle, looking first north then south. It was deserted except for a few NYU students trying out their skis down toward Washington Square Arch, their lettered jackets bobbing like beetles over sand. The whiteness of everything was visually painful in the daylight. Squinting, I turned and headed north, determined to see how far I could go before being sidewalked by a motor vehicle.

Ahead, a solitary plow finished heaving a new bank of snow up the right side of the street and turned east on Twelfth, burying the sidewalk. From the opposite intersection a small black object appeared, no bigger at first than the specks that dart before the eyes after staring into a strong light. In fits and starts, it grew larger and turned out to be a woman wrapped in a voluminous hooded cape, dodging the white chunks left in the plow's wake. Given the current weather conditions, her bare ankles seemed incongruous, as did her feet in what looked like highly inappropriate, black ballerina-style slippers. The face was concealed within the hood, but two fingers protruded from the front folds, holding the curled top of a small brown paper bag.

She crossed the avenue and was stopped by the newly formed snow barrier. The hood nodded down, then up. There weren't any paths to the sidewalk now. So she tentatively poked a foot into the mound, but found it too soft to hold her entire body aloft, and retreated to the middle of the road, hood bobbing. "Damsel in Distress," I read in an invisible balloon overhead, and hurried toward her.

Leaping atop the white dune, I whipped off my scarf and stretched it out lengthwise, making a thin plaid carpet for her to step on, then offered a hand. Since she was still clutching the little bag, she offered a draped elbow for me to guide her with. Safely over the hump, she laughed and exclaimed over-dramatically, "My knight in shining armor! Thank you so veddy much." The voice inflections were either British or Australian, and when she straightened up, she towered over my five-foot-ten. The hood slipped back, revealing the face of a benevolent witch, lantern jawed, and topped by an unruly mat of red hair. The mouth was no more than a wide slit with corners. It then dawned on me that this was none other than Joan Sutherland (later to be Dame Joan), the world's most brilliant contemporary coloratura opera diva.

I'd seen her perform numbers of times at the Metropolitan Opera Houses, both at midtown and Lincoln Center, and she was the type that, once seen and heard, left an indelible print on one's memory. But what was

she doing here, at this time of day, in this weather? I knew that when she was appearing in New York, she and her conductor husband Richard Bonyngé often stayed in borrowed apartments in the city or Brooklyn to save traveling time; I also knew that she was to sing her first NORMA at the Met in a month—March 1970. So both those things must have contributed to her being there.

She stamped snow from her slippers and thanked me again profusely. “It was my pleasure, Miss Sutherland,” I blurted.

“Oh, my!” she gasped and pulled the hood toward her face with the bag. “You know! Well, then please don’t let a soul know about this. I didn’t realize about the snow and...they’d think me daft, really, got up like this. Oh, dear. Well, ta!”

She pulled the cloak tighter to her and tiptoed daintily away, but not before I got a good look at the brown paper bag; it bore several large grease stains and held the impression of a large bagel inside. By the time I’d dusted off my scarf, she’d disappeared somewhere north of the Salmagundi Club. I walked on, recalling with a snort Act Three of Puccini’s “La Bohème,” where Mimi, the consumptive little seamstress enters onstage, coughing her lungs out as snow falls outside the tavern where she has come to seek her beloved. “Not my range,” is probably what Sutherland would have said if I’d mentioned the coincidence. It was also not her kind of role, her penchant being for deranged or larger-than-life “crazies.”

I saw her NORMA that spring, and she literally took our breaths away with her bel canto vocal pyrotechnics, just as we expected, as Bellini’s high priestess of the Druids. Also, when she moved in such a way that skirts of her costume lifted, I noticed she was wearing something very like the slippers she had on in the street. Years later I caught her again at the San Francisco Opera and was overwhelmed once more. But the mystery of the brown paper bag remained to haunt me. Did it contain a plain bagel? Or whole wheat? Or my favorite, cinnamon raisin? With a shmear of cream cheese? I’ll never know.

★ ★ ★

AHEAD TO THE PAST

Through the years, music continued to exert a profound influence on me, perhaps more than anything else. Though no longer active in it professionally, I still managed an hour or so a day at the piano during summers on Nantucket Island and built up a considerable collection of classical tapes that, along with FM radio, provided aural inspiration and solace, summer and winter, for the long hours of solitary confinement in one or the other of my painting studios.

It was only natural, then, to extend that interest to Foundation considerations, especially in the area of experimental theater-music composition, which most closely paralleled our concern for avant-garde playwrighting. Grants eventually ranged all over the board, from sending promising young composers like Richard Peaslee to mingle and exchange ideas with like-minded talents at national symposia in the early 1970s, to sponsoring productions like Samuel Beckett’s *MERCIER AND CAMIER* at the Public Theater in 1979, with composer Philip Glass, one of the founders of Mabou Mines, working again with other members of the troupe to explore ways of integrating spoken and musical sounds, following up his earlier experiments in creating meaningful new opera forms in collaboration with Robert Wilson that resulted in the landmark *EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH*, presented at the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center in 1976.

Sometimes we got two for the price of one, when, for example, it was decided that a basically non-musical project needed some kind of melodic background, and the sounds were so interesting that the here-to-fore unknown composer (and, as likely, performer) was “discovered” and serendipitously launched on an individual career. Anyone visiting the second-floor apartment/performance area of puppeteer Robbie Anton, on Manhattan’s upper West Side in the early 1970s, to watch him perform his miniature magic for the first

time, would have discovered a very young Elizabeth Swados seated cross-legged in the shadows behind his tiny, black velvet cubicle, coaxing relevant murmurs out of a wildly diverse array of objects—from ordinary kitchen utensils to exotic Tibetan flutes and gongs—in some of her earliest attempts at forging what would become a very personal musical language that would reach full flowering in her later collaborations with Andre Serban at La MaMa E.T.C. later in the decade.

From 1976 to 1980, we followed Nancy Rhodes and her Encompass Theatre to various locations, including a former skin flick emporium upstairs over Times Square, where she presented neglected works by established American opera composers such as Mark Blitzstein's REGINA, based on Hellman's THE LITTLE FOXES, and new work she commissioned from little-known contemporaries, like THE YELLOW WALLPAPER by Gloria Albee in 1976, based on an adaptation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic story of an anguished woman's eerie descent into madness. She gave them all loving stagings with full sets and costumes and splendid young professional singers. Among the stand-out in Encompass' vivid history were FANTASIES TAKE FLIGHT, an evening of short operas that included Gian-Carlo Menotti's A HAND OF BRIDGE, Charles Strouse's SATISFACTION, and INTRODUCTIONS AND GOODBYES with music by Lucas Foss and lyrics by Menotti; FRUSTRATION by Sheldon Harnick; MR. & MRS. DISCOBBOLOS by Peter Westergaard, based on an Edward Lear poem; FOUR NOTE OPERA by Tom Johnson; and in 1979, POSTCARD FROM MOROCCO by Dominick Argento.

Then there were the first plays with music that Tom O'Horgan directed at La MaMa E.T.C. in the late 1960s, detailed more closely in the next chapter, that culminated in the 1983 production there of THE LIGHT OPERA by Charles Morrow. There were productions by the Music-Theatre Performing Group/Lenox Arts Center at St. Clement's (after The American Place Theater moved out) and a musical theater series over at Playwrights Horizons that eventually produced the output of one very remarkable young composer named William Finn, including FALSETTOS.

But among the isolated performances that scampered across our ledger sheets in the course of twenty-five years, one was remembered almost as if it had just been seen recently instead of 1987. It was titled SECOND SPECIES and was billed as an opera/music theater piece conceived and directed by Keith King with new music and musical adaptations of classic operas by Skip LaPlante. Joan Sutherland would have loved it!

In the fall of 1986, Theater for the New City moved to its new home at 55 First Avenue, in a former public market turned into a sanitation department truck garage owned by the city of New York, and donated for TNC's use. Unfortunately TNC moved in before the city was able to get all the garbage trucks out, so there was only a fraction of the cavernous space available for theatrical presentations at the time. Crystal Field and George Bartenieff, its artistic directors, had to scout around to find an appropriate place to do SECOND SPECIES, a large work with a large cast that needed a large performing area. They finally found it at the eastern end of Fourth Street, in a place called R.A.P.P. Center, a meandering series of cheerless chambers that once comprised a Catholic convent school. Most rooms had long ago been mutilated beyond recognition, but there was, amazingly enough, an "opera house" in its midst, left almost intact architecturally, albeit encrusted with dust, and peeling. It consisted of a large, oval auditorium with a heavy-browed wrap-around balcony and a high proscenium stage half as deep again as the auditorium. Keith King decided to seat the theatergoers on the stage and perform the opera in the larger auditorium, so the action could be spread out, but still visible to all viewers. It worked well, but limited the number of patrons that could be accommodated and forced the musicians to squeeze themselves and instruments into the balcony.

It premiered on March 5, 1987. The ground floor waiting room held explanatory exhibits to prepare the patrons for the story: old clippings from Metropolitan Opera programs showing not only lists of casts and scenes, but also their opposite pages featuring four-color advertisements of everything from cigarettes to new cars; glass cases held libretto fragments, bits of photographs of famous singers and shards of musical instruments, but *no musical scores*. We learned that all those objects derived from our own and previous times,

whereas the opera takes place one millennium in the future. King's program notes further explained: "SECOND SPECIES is set in the future. A great catastrophe has destroyed earth's electrical generating capacity, and all the technicians who might have been able to create it.

"The inhabitants of this future society have found fragments of opera (tapes, scraps of libretti, programs, photographs—but not written music) which they attempt to understand by performing them. These fragments were found in an abandoned bomb shelter (where someone used to retreat for peace and listening) powered by solar energy and photovoltaic cells—the only locations of electricity in this future.

"The future society believes that the opera taped material has a sacred function and has put it to use to meet the problems they face. They have learned to reproduce the vocal sounds they hear. Frequently, what they think was done is not what was done.

"The future society has, of course, only what is at hand to go on. The photographs they have found show people engaged in athletics, setting the table, shopping, etc., as well as on stage. All of these activities are believed to have been worshipful and ceremonial.

"The ceremony is held each year on the dig site where the tapes were found. Its purpose is to avert the ills that afflict the society, evils that its *own* songs and dances have been unable to stem.

"The musical fragments heard on the tape recordings (from *The Marriage Of Figaro*, *La Traviata*, *Madame Butterfly*, etc.) are interpreted according to the function they seem to serve best (curing illness, changing the weather, for example) and are sung and danced in postures based upon the photographs. The inhabitants hope that these performances are historically accurate and will provide the hoped-for results.

"SECOND SPECIES recreates the ceremonial button pushing ritual. As each ritual is successfully performed, the Old Woman enters the dig chamber, now empowered to press one of the electrical buttons found inside. When switched on in the correct sequence (a secret passed from one Old Woman to the next in line), the final button turns on the air circulation system in the dig chamber. This mysterious force, they believe, ritually 'blows away' the evils surrounding them for yet another year."

Skip LaPlante added: "In the course of the twenty-first century, prior to the great catastrophe, electronic musical instruments completely replaced acoustic instruments, which then were totally forgotten over the next few centuries.

"The music of the surviving culture was distinguished by three trends:

"One: Acoustic instruments were rediscovered. Idiophones (struck instruments) were simple to discover and produce. Many varieties of new idiophones were created.

"It was discovered that tubes could be blown into to produce sounds. Long tubes blown with a buzzing armature (like a diggery-doo) may have been the first of these wind instruments discovered. Also present at this time were collections of short tubes, closed at one end, strapped together (like pan pipes).

"Surprisingly, the people of this period never discovered the principle of changing pitch through controlling the length of the air column via finger holes. Less surprising, neither membranophones (drums) or chordophones (stringed instruments) seemed to be used by this civilization.

"Two: The electronic music just before the power failure used an extremely micro-tonal pitch system, probably something like five-hundred pitches per octave. With the loss of the electronics that made such a tuning system possible, the more practical tuning system of thirty-one equally spaced notes per octave became standard.

"Three: The soloist's music that developed as a result of the electronics, with one person responsible for all dimensions of a sound event, was rapidly replaced by a new aesthetic in which group participation was the more important aspect.

"Musical forms were created primarily so all members of a group could participate. This improvisatory

music used rules based on turn talking, where *who* went next was far more important than what sounds came next.

“The society based their own music on bird and insect calls—fairly loud and important sounds in a world not filled with the sound of machines, as ours now is.”

Further down the room, detailed historical justifications for the premises set forth in *SECOND SPECIES* were noted on wall charts and illustrations. For example, one claimed no South American culture discovered stringed instruments before the Spanish arrived in the late 1500s. Another, that many African village rituals are structured so that every individual is able to participate at whatever level possible, there being virtually no spectators. The composers also indicated that, according to R. Murray Schaeffer in his book *THE TUNING OF THE WORLD*, the loudest sounds in the 1700s would have been water-powered forges or mills. By contrast, the loud sounds of the present day would be aeronautical machines such as rockets or Concorde airplanes.

In earlier times, the members of society would have been more aware of such environmental sounds as bird calls, which would have been the loudest sounds in existence then, not the softest, as they are presently. The human voice is capable of making many different kinds of sounds, not just the clearly pitched, loud, sustaining notes that were in use for singing from the twentieth century backward, so it is reasonable to assume that other societies' vocal traditions might be based on producing totally different sounds.

As for the traditions of instrumental music, King and LaPlante circumvented that by using instruments that La Plante invented and built out of trash parts, such as metal wash tubs and rusty saws combined with gut, rope and assorted lengths of pipes for winds, into a veritable recycled band. He had already created some two hundred such instruments after his graduation from Princeton, and founded a performing collective called Music For Homemade Instruments that performed around the United States. Some of his uniquely designed instruments were exhibited in such museums as The Smithsonian Institution and the American Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

So, with all that knowledge swirling about in our heads, we joined the other opera goers who were being led single file through a narrow doorway and down and around a dark corridor that seemed to still echo with the muted giggles and sibilant whispers of uniformed school children. Through another doorway and up a flight of steps, we at last came to what was once backstage—empty now of any telltale props or costumes from the past, except for a faded school banner.

We were seated in metal folding chairs on the stage and handed full-color pages of ads torn from vintage opera playbills, hawking everything from cigarettes to washing machines to household cleansers, all displayed by smiling male, female, and children models who seemed to be ignoring the products. Mine, for example, showed knickered golfers at play, with the caption, “After a hard round, relax with a soft smoke.” My neighbor's showed a group of young women happily bowling in the foreground while their wash was being done automatically by the latest washing machines in the background. Another depicted a large family group playing croquet on a vast expanse of lawn, while on the driveway in the distance sat two new sports cars.

Most of the audience, it turned out, were opera lovers often seen at the Met, and had read all the information in the waiting room with interest and anticipation. They would not be disappointed. The house lights were dimmed to near darkness as strange bird calls and scraping sounds were heard. The actors entered from the back of the auditorium in ceremonial single file, dressed in what looked to be animal skins highlighted with shimmering feathers. Some, the “chorus,” hung back against the wall, carrying carved icons with portraits of contemporary opera divas on them, haloed like saints. The intended satire was already apparent.

The cast of characters who fanned out from the center of the room and took positions along the two side walls included six Celebrants, who were to sing the material on the tapes; the Archivist (George McGrath) who acted as master of ceremonies and was responsible for assuring that all the performances of the taped

material sounded like the originals; the Wiseold, an ancient woman who was responsible for seeing to it that the performances of the material had emotional accuracy, and also was the one who pushed the buttons in the appropriate sequences; six Initiates—children who had been led on to be trained in the mysteries of the ceremony; and the Ceremonial Demon, a frightening figure who was both more naked and more preposterously feathered than the rest, who personified evil forces, and darted in and out at intervals in mad frenzied dance steps to attempt to disrupt the proceedings; and a trio of musicians led by Skip LaPlante.

The first act had the Initiates brought forward to the center of the sacred place and awakened from their drugged states. The Celebrants calmed them and then began the opening rituals, overseen by the Archivist and Old Woman. During that part of the ceremony, with great bowing and turning, the Celebrants assumed the names of The Great Performers, or saints, after singing excerpts of the roles that made them famous. Unfortunately, since the tribe's historical data were so incomplete and fragmented, the list of "Greats" got badly scrambled, and names like Julio Iglesias and Cyndi Lauper were included with Maria Callas and Leonard Warren, and so on. When the singers erred in trying to repeat the tape sounds exactly, the Archivist flogged them unmercifully with great bouquets of flowers, like the ones shown in ancient photographs being showered on the original performers at the end of their arias.

Since it was assumed that the colored photographs opposite each page of the descriptive material in the recovered playbill fragments showed the actions, settings and costumes of the operas themselves, the Celebrants recreated those scenes as exactly as possible while singing the arias, not realizing (as, of course, the audience on the stage did) that they were unrelated sheets of blatant advertising. As a result, the lovely "humming Chorus" from MADAME BUTTERFLY, for example, was sung while the family members of the automobile commercial played a game with balls, mallets, and wire hoops around the auditorium imitating the poses in the picture, but never getting close to "croquet," which they never had heard of.

In Act Two, the Celebrants, again under the guidance of the Archivist and the Old Woman, performed the "sacred fragments" and instructed the Initiates in their mysteries and use. The Initiates began making relevant sounds, and then tried to imitate what they heard on the tapes, adding motions that by tradition accompanied them; to excerpts of THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO, they devised a dance that would assure good weather and abundant sources of food. The opera ended when the Old Woman, who was the keeper of all that was traditional, was stripped of her most potent sacred relics, a set of ancient piano pedals, by the ever-encircling evil Demon, and was left in a heap of rags and broken feathers to die, while one of the younger female Celebrants was groomed to replace her with all the pomp and ceremony of the crowning of a new monarch.

Despite the piece's obvious playfulness, it made a wicked statement about the way operatic lore is sometimes turned into fetishism by the cogniscenti. The introduction of excerpts from easily recognized operas like LA BOHEME, MADAME BUTTERFLY, ORFEO, and DIDO AND AENEAS showcased some of the excellent young voices of the cast, especially Elizabeth Evans, Martha King, Janet Rhodes, Claire Picher, Allen Roberts, George McGrath, and Robert Steen. The impressive dancing demon was Peter Kisiluk, who used his studies of classical Japanese, Balinese, and Javanese movements to advantage. Accolades were in order for the instrumentalists, Daniel Bridston, Iris Brooks, and David Simons, whose handling of LaPlante's primitive musical contraptions in the attempted recreation of the full lush orchestrations of the recorded operas, made for some bizarre and very funny bits of stage business, to say nothing of the weird sound juxtapositions they produced.

A work of this magnitude and scope required almost as technical and artistic a crew as for a Metropolitan Opera production. James Finguerra was called in to do the sets, and he was no stranger to us, having designed the sets for the Robert Wilson/Philip Glass EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH, John Jesurun's DOG'S EYE VIEW, and the very amusing work of my fellow summer Nantucketers, Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara, SNEAK PREVIEWS. Deena Burton was the Movement and Staging Consultant; Mary Brecht did the cos-

tumes; and Ronald Katz, the lighting. Mark Sussman, who was the overall production Stage Manager, was also known for his work with Mabou Mines.

Unfortunately, in spite of all the effort and talent expended, SECOND SPECIES finished its run on East Fourth Street, and was not heard of again, except maybe by me whenever I returned to the former convent to monitor other works by other companies; I swore I heard faint reverberations of its haunting music in the corridors still. Or was that sound by association, like hearing the ocean in a conch shell, or the wheeze of a calliope at the sight of a circus tent going up in the rubble off Interstate 95?

★ ★ ★

Our Foundation continued funding a broad range of performing activities like those just described until it found its true calling: supporting staged play productions and playwriting almost exclusively. But not before it had toyed with everything from high-wire acts to puppet shows, comedians to cinema vérité, performance art to performance publications. In the process, we found a disturbing trend away from the spoken and written word, and toward an emphasis on gesture and visual symbolism. But, for those of us who still revered (and missed) dialogue in the theater, there emerged one gallant defender of the faith who believed the work of the playwright remained the most important element in drama, and who set out to devote a lifetime to the discovery and nurturing of talented young writers, often despite incredible obstacles. The fact that this person was, (1) a theatrical innocent with little more than fierce determination and messianic zeal, (2) a woman, and (3) a black whose name would become synonymous with Off Off Broadway, lends an almost unbelievable quality to the story.

But her dreams were very real ones, and her life was no fantasy. She was the one and only Ellen Stewart.

Chapter Six

Earth Mama

First came the clatter of a little cowbell to get the audience focused to the edge of the performing area where she stood ringing it; then the dazzling smile that encompassed the entire room, a faint nod of the handsome head, and the familiar words of greeting with that unforgettable slurring, sing-song inflection that turned standard phrases into gentle questions:

“Good evening? Ladies and gen’le-MEN? Welcome to La MaMa E.T.C? Dedicated to z’ playwright? and all forms of z’ theater?”

To the uninitiated, the accent sounded vaguely French, but it was, more specifically, a derivative of Creole called “Geechee,” a dialect descended, like the speaker, from the Negro slaves along the Ogeechee River in Georgia. Anyone who had followed the growth of theater in New York from the early 1960s would recognize the voice as that of Ellen Stewart, the most charismatic figure in the downtown culture scene since Joe Cino. After his suicide in 1967 and the closing of the caffè, she and her La MaMa company were among the driving forces in the as yet unnamed theater movement that was to develop into Off Off Broadway.

The ritual was performed on a Thursday night in late winter, 1991, before the start of the latest in a dizzying array of avant-garde productions she presented in twenty-eight years, but it could have been at any of them. The introduction never varied; and it was followed by mention of the play of the evening, then its playwright, director, cast, and set, costume, and lighting designers, always in that order (but not always correctly pronounced, especially later on when eyesight weakened, and the words on the little slip of paper she read from blurred). It ended with a gracious lift of the head toward the upper reaches of the back tiers and, “Enjoy z’ show? an’ tell your friends to come zee it?” After a final nod to acknowledge the scattered applause, she made a quick check of the house for familiar faces. Spotting me half-way up on the left aisle, she smiled, waved and blew a kiss, then grabbed the railing and began a slow upward climb, pausing every few steps for breath. When she reached me she plopped down on the landing beside my chair, dropped her satchel, and planted a big motherly kiss on my cheek, rasping, “ello, dah’lin.” She called everybody dah-lin.

“How are you, Ellen?” I asked.

“Your MaMa is sick, dah-lin? Here, feel?” She took my hand and forced it palm down against the chest of her bulky sweater. The heartbeat was certainly rapid.

“Oh, ‘s terrible lately, you know?” Pause. “Never had it so bad before.”

It was common knowledge for years that she had a serious heart problem and recently had been absent from the theater for long stretches because of it. But in all that time I had never heard her admit it or even discuss any kind of illness at all until now. Invincibility was part of her schtick.

“Why, then, are you climbing stairs like this? Doesn’t your doctor make you take it easy on stuff like that?”

Sigh. “Oh, z’ doctor? Yuh. Well. He scolds me like zee ba-Bee? ‘n’ pushes more peels? He says rest rest rest. Yuh, sure.” Then, sotto voce, as if she thought she might be disturbing our neighbors (who were, by then, all ears straining to catch her every word—the curse of celebrity), “Tomorrow I fly to Ee-stanbul? A new piece zey want MaMa to direct.” Resigned shrug.

“But, Ellen, honey, do you know what kind of turmoil is raging in that area now? And you in that condition? It’s insane!” I was truly incredulous.

She paused to reflect on that a moment and catch another breath or two. I watched her intently. The face was as wonderfully alive and vibrant as ever. The high bronze cheeks were round and firm and there wasn’t a wrinkle anywhere, not even around those lustrous eyes. The trademark false eyelashes were applied a little

less carefully than in the old days, but they were still there and glamorous; the succession of various-colored wigs of yesteryear had given way to her own natural steely grey hair, now fashioned into a Queen-of-the-Nile headdress with hundreds on thin tightly braided strands falling from both sides of a central part.

Her age, which she wouldn't reveal, was anybody's guess; the only thing known for sure was that in 1967, when she looked about thirty, she admitted to an interviewer that she had a twenty-six year old son and that she was already a grandmother. (The son became a car salesman, and her former husband was a postman.) So here she was, a quarter century later, still looking out of this world, but apparently not feeling it.

"Ellen, do you know what you're getting yourself into?" I repeated. "Are you nuts?"

"I know. I know," she sighed again, "but zey can only get z' funds from z' state if I promise to do z' play? I can't let z' young people down now. Zey are so talented? I haff t' go. Zey need MaMa. What else can I do, dah-lin?"

What "zey" needed MaMa for was to direct a new piece she'd written herself ("I composed the music, too. Surprise?" she boasted in a letter to me later that year) based on the life of the Sufi Poet Yunus Emre who lived in Turkey in the thirteenth century. The country's Minister of Culture commissioned it to commemorate the seven-hundredth anniversary of his birth, and it was performed by twenty-seven Turkish actors in the Hagia Sophia Mosque, that vast empty relic of Byzantium where I remembered spending one spring morning exploring ancient shadows and trying to visually fill in the gaps between the remaining dusty fragments of mosaic murals that rose and dissolved into the gloom of towering semi-domes, returning only occasional faint traces of that golden age.

1991 was named "The Year of Yunus Emre" by UNESCO, and Ellen utilized elements of his poetry to tell the story of the man's dream for a harmonious, loving world that exemplified the concepts of the United Nations organization itself. (The work was also performed for the Congress of the International Theatre Institute being held at the time in Istanbul; we had long enjoyed close ties with its American branch, ITI of US, and its director Martha Coigney enlisted our aid in helping to bring the work to New York for a run at La MaMa.)

She shrugged, smiled again, and reached deeply into her leather pouch, pulling out a thick envelope of snapshots. Changing the subject, she said, "Look at what my other pile of bricks is doing," and put them in my lap. The photos were of a medieval ruin, presumed to have once been an old monastery, that she purchased in 1985 with some of the three-hundred-thousand-dollar grant she received as a recipient of a MacArthur "genius" fellowship. It clung precariously to a hillside in a tiny village not far from Spoleto, Italy, where she had taken the La MaMa troupe in the mid 1960s to perform at the annual arts festival. She planned to convert it into an artists' colony, but soon ran out of money and had to be content with the renovation proceeding at a snail's pace, worked on only when she could scrape together a tittle extra cash. From the photos it still looked far from completed: one wing, for example, seemed to have collapsed down the hill several hundred years ago, and tall cedars now grew up like natural pillars through the foundation, supporting only a canopy of densely blue Umbrian sky. Every once in a while, when she spotted me in the audience like this, she'd whip out the latest batch of pictures from her Italian contractor, showing the current state of repair, and I felt each time she handed them over she was trying to convince herself as well as me that some real progress had been made. But after each viewing I became more and more convinced that she was probably unlikely to see the total renovation in her lifetime.

The performance was held up all this time, but Ellen didn't seem to be concerned about keeping the other theatergoers waiting. She took her time fitting the envelope back in the pouch, then got down to the real reason she'd mounted the stairs.

"Your group, Otrabanda? Roger Babb? Rocky? All of them? I told them they cannot appear at La MaMa ever again. Zey know the rules. You know the rules. They didn't once mention La MaMa in any of their bios

in the playbill for the last play zey did here. Not once! I gave them their start, don't forget—right here on zis stage? If zey are going to be so ungrateful, zey cannot be in z' family any more. No more. I told them. You tell them, dah-lin?"

She checked her wristwatch with large numerals, gave me a quick wet one near the ear, and stiffly rose to a standing position. As she slowly started back down the stairs she raised one arm as a cue for the technicians to douse the house lights, holding tightly to the rail with the other. By the time she reached the bottom step she was a small black silhouette against the rising stage spots; she paused for a few quick breaths, hiked up the shoulder bag, and left-turned into the darkness, and the performance got under way.

Stewart had become an international figure and her La MaMa Experimental Theater Club a world-wide entity (there were mini La MaMas all over Europe). She'd helped literally hundreds of playwrights and acting companies get started, and she did it lovingly. But they soon learned the price for her patronage was absolute, unwavering fealty and devotion; they must continually honor and proclaim the source of their success (kissing ass—all of it—was how one bluntly put it). Unthinking lapses like that of the Otrabanda troupe (and I was convinced that's all it was) could mean banishment from the magical queendom.

Otrabanda was one of the most promising performing units to emerge in the 1980s. Ellen herself urged me to see their work when they first appeared under her auspices, and was thrilled when we began funding them soon after—hence her snide "your group." I subsequently wrote a letter of intercession on Otrabanda's behalf, which she answered with a hand-written note in her famous purple ink. It was startling in its incoherence—she maintained she was always better at face-to-face encounters than trying to explain herself on paper, and she was right—and also revealing about her matriarchal bidding: she ended it by admitting perhaps she was wrong to have such strong feelings about "family," but that was how she was and couldn't (wouldn't?) change now. She must have had second thoughts on this one, however, for several months later, at the close of a letter about another project, she inserted a brief post script reporting that Otrabanda had been forgiven, and the prodigals welcomed back into the fold, small thanks to me. But her stubbornness could be unflinching, and there were orphaned transgressors aplenty strewn all along the wayside to prove it.

Her ferocious kindness was also something of a legend and in time cast a glow over her very like a halo. She had been around—and renowned—for so long that I was ready to believe she originated full-blown on a pizza slice over the Lower East Side like a dark version of Botticelli's Venus. However, her beginnings weren't remotely celestial, and the story of how she got to be the MaMa of us all is as fascinating and inspiring as any found in the *History of the Saints* or *Bullfinch's Mythology*.

Ellen Stewart was a Negro, born in Alexandria, Louisiana, the daughter of a tailor and a school teacher. She was ever elusive about her date of birth and some aspects of her early life, but we know that there were vaudeville and burlesque people in her family, and her adopted brother aspired to be a playwright; as children they constructed theaters together out of shoe boxes and actors from wooden spools, and created plays for them. When she grew up she wanted to become a fashion designer, but knew that was impossible for a black girl in Alexandria at the time. So she entered the University of Arkansas to study teaching instead, and from there found her way to Chicago and a job in dressmaking that was meant to be temporary. One day she saw an ad for the Traphagen School of Design in New York City and liked the name so much she decided (after also learning it accepted students of color) that she wanted to go there.

Before leaving Chicago for good, Ellen made elaborate plans with a girl friend who was already living in the Big Apple to meet under the famous clock in the lobby of the old Biltmore Hotel next to Grand Central Station the day her train arrived; the plan, as she understood it, was also for the two of them to share an apartment somewhere in Manhattan, and for the friend to help her find a part-time job and accompany her to the Traphagen School to see about enrolling. In the weeks before arriving, Ellen spent all her time making a huge, red coat that she planned to wear under the clock so she couldn't be missed.

On the appointed day, she donned the coat after detraining and swept confidently into the Biltmore like

a modern-day Red Riding Hood. She had no trouble finding the rendezvous spot, but saw no one there she knew. For several hours she swirled in her coat this way and that, hoping to be discovered as her confidence began to wane with the minutes. Eventually she faced up to the reality of the situation: the “friend” was not going to show up; it was Saturday afternoon; and she’d better do something about it immediately. She took the subway to Harlem, got off at 125th Street, and found a room in a Spanish hotel nearby. She had exactly sixty dollars to her name. By Monday she had twenty dollars. She boarded a downtown Fifth Avenue bus, and when it came to a large stone structure at 50th Street, she got off and went in; it was St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Being a devout Catholic, she approached a side altar to light a candle and pray for divine guidance.

Back out on the steps to the street she spotted Saks Fifth Avenue department store in the next block south and headed for it. From practice she checked around inside to see if any Negroes worked there; they did, but all of them seemed to be running elevators. No matter, she thought, and decided to apply for that job, asking directions to the personnel office. She filled out the obligatory form and was waiting her turn for an interview when a call came in from another floor seeking someone well-enough trained in sewing techniques to be able to snip threads from delicate garments (bras, as it turned out). Ellen qualified and was given her employee number almost before the candle across the street burned out.

It was not unpleasant work, but it was limited. So on her days off, she satisfied her natural curiosity and love of adventure by walking about the city alone (she knew no one yet), exploring a different area each weekend, and found herself falling madly in love with New York. One Sunday, she ventured down to Orchard and Delancey Streets on the Lower East Side. Fascinated by the crowded outdoor pushcarts displaying all kinds of dry goods, she came upon one heaped with bolts of colorful shiny fabrics she couldn’t resist fondling. In a wink, a little old Jewish man in a yarmulke emerged from the adjacent storefront and tried to sell her some lengths. His name was Abe Diamond, and, after he learned a bit about Ellen—that she was new to the city and broke, but more importantly that she loved to make clothes—he took her to a local delicatessen, bought her a pastrami on rye and glass of celery soda, and said he was “adopting” her.

Every Sunday thereafter, she returned to sit all day long in his shop alongside his fat wife, two fat sons, and three fat daughters, as he regaled her with stories of his youth and family in Russia between customers. When it was time to leave, he would bring out a neatly wrapped package and ceremoniously hand it to her—it was always a piece of very special fabric, often velvet or lace, that he’d scoured the neighborhood for during the previous week—admonishing her to create something beautiful for herself out of it to wear next time for him to see; it became a ritual she looked forward to. Ellen had brought a small portable sewing machine from Chicago and would begin working on each outfit as soon as she returned home from the ideas she came up with during the long subway ride to Harlem, always finishing it in time to wear the next Sunday for his appraisal. He’d gloat, then walk her around the streets, showing her off to his acquaintances, telling them that she was his “daughter, the artist.”

She delighted in the Orchard Street ambience, with the colorful carts nudging each other for attention, and the good-natured bantering and bargaining between the vendors and their customers; there was an excitement about it that turned every Sunday into a festival, and Ellen took to it like a warm bath. She and Abe would leisurely browse among the stalls unrolling bolts of cloth, judging textures and brilliance in the sunlight. She seemed to understand him as his family didn’t, and he always looked sad when their visits ended. Recalling that period later, she would shake her head and say ruefully, “How I loved zis little old man.”

Ellen also wore those dresses she made to work where Saks Fifth Avenue patrons could see her walking about, looking like a million; she was a natural clothes horse, with a slender, knock-out figure, exotic coffee-colored skin, and a bearing that made all eyes turn. She was well aware of it, of course, and played it to the hilt, tossing her large hand-wrought hoop earrings as she went about her job, along with a smile that could light up the darkest storerooms. Customers assumed she was a special house model and began asking about the clothes and where to buy them. The fashion department head eventually rented mezzanine space and

installed her in her own design center where she dealt exclusively in her original custom-made apparel. It was wildly successful. Her white associates (then as later) seemed to totally disregard her skin color, so caught up were they by her exuberance and talent. But not so the members of her race. All the other blacks at the store worked at menial jobs and were the only employees forced to wear blue smocks in the store. They resented her uppity behavior and dress, and petitioned the management to either make her wear the demeaning uniform or allow them to discard theirs, to no avail. Eventually their anger reached the boiling point and in the uncomfortable atmosphere that followed, she quit.

It took Papa Abe and all his persuasion to get her to finally promise to go back, if only, he said, because the department supervisor had gone to all that expense and trouble on her behalf. Despite the glares and snide comments that first accompanied her return, she ultimately prevailed: they continued wearing blue while she wore her fancy dresses, false eyelashes and glittery beads, and kept her customers happy for another seven years. Then illness and a subsequent surgery forced her to take a long leave of absence, from which she never returned to Saks; instead, she went to Morocco with a friend, Theresa Klein, and hung out.

Tangier was an International Zone within Morocco after World War II. That meant a free port where no one was refused entry; and it developed a notorious reputation for smuggling, drug dealing, and free sex, among other glamorous pursuits. The late 1950s were a rerun (or continuation) of the 1940s. Hundreds of dissatisfied American expatriates swarmed to it like moths to flames. The cafés and bars became the haunts of would-be writers and dabblers at art, with a handful of serious practitioners holed up in filthy little hovels behind beaded curtains. Nobody gave a damn if you were famous or not—Tangier rendered all its inhabitants anonymous. (Truman Capote left there in a snit because no one seemed to know, or care, who he was). So it was a perfect place to lose and find yourself.

I remembered it as one of the most bizarre places on earth, where nothing seemed to happen except just around the corner. I wouldn't have been surprised to see Sidney Greenstreet emerge from a barber shop, or Peter Lorre take my restaurant order. The souk was the busiest and noisiest in Africa, teeming with vendors offering everything from tiny song birds in bamboo cages to prayer rugs so worn from bowed heads the mihrabs had lost all traces of design. The open-air market was a cornucopia of the colors of the continent: heaped mounds of orange cayenne pepper, red paprika, green spices, pyramids of purple eggplants, and shiny black olives. I lived down the hill from the infamous Green Parrot Bar where, in the course of a day, every type of human being passed through—low and high—and every transaction imaginable could be overheard, monitored by a bevy of comely youths in djellabas beckoning along the sea wall for instant gratification. Time passed quickly in Tangier—or not at all.

Ellen and Theresa were sitting in the Casbah one endless day, ogling the passersby, and philosophizing on the meaning of life, when something Theresa said struck Ellen like lightning: "Every man should have his own pushcart," or "You gotta have a pushcart outside yourself," meaning some dream project to keep before you as a goal. She remembered old Abe and Orchard Street and suddenly realized what she was missing was her own pushcart to haul her dreams in and it could never be found there. She packed up and traveled back to New York.

She soon found out that Morocco, with its laissez-faire rule and where all skin was the same hue, was not the real world; it didn't take her long to be reminded that nothing had changed about white America's attitude toward Negroes in her absence. Answering a newspaper ad, she went for an interview for a designer position at the establishment of a Madame Rosa on posh 57th Street. When the Madame saw that she was colored, she wouldn't even let her get off the elevator into her salon, saying she couldn't believe there was a Negro who knew how to hold a pair of scissors properly, to say nothing of being capable of handling precious twenty-five-dollar-a-yard fabrics. The more Stewart tried to convince her of her expertise ("I had two gowns at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, for heaven's sake!"), the more the diminutive bigot humiliated her and eventually commanded her to push the elevator's down button.

Devastated, she landed back on the street and broke into tears so copious the flow couldn't be staunch ed even by buying a new set of false eyelashes (which had always worked before). She walked east on Fifty-seventh in a blur. At Second Avenue, she boarded a downtown bus, intent on visiting her friend Norman's frame shop on Ninth Street; she went there when feeling low. Norman had a customer who collected Marc Chagall's work, and there was usually something by him there waiting to be framed. Ellen loved the Russian painter's canvases and found great solace in them; she'd prop one up on a counter, commune with it for an hour or so, and leave feeling much better.

Getting off the bus, she made her way east on Ninth in the direction of the shop and, almost there, she glanced across the street and saw a "Basement for Rent" sign. Suddenly, like a mirage, she envisioned her pushcart in its place; and in it were her friend Theresa, Chagall, and two new young playwrights she'd recently befriended: Paul Foster, a Princeton Law School graduate, and Ross Alexander, a truck driver. Squeezed in amidst them was her brother Fred Lights, and she was behind, pushing. She decided on the spot that she had to have the basement. Like every other important decision in her life, once her mind was made up about it she was blessed (or cursed) with tunnel vision—what many of us later came to call one-track stubbornness. In her mind she already had the lease in hand, and pictured the space as a dress boutique by day and a theater for the likes of Foster, Alexander, and her brother at night. Never again would she work for someone else or subject herself to the hateful tirades of future Madame Rosas.

Fred Lights, in 1949, was a theology student at Howard University but had inclinations toward playwrighting. After a lecture visit to the school by New York theater critic Walter Kerr, he became convinced he wanted only to write plays and was subsequently accepted at Yale Drama School. In a Cinderella scenario that left him, as well as his sister, surprised and stunned, he authored a musical that was actually accepted by a producer and was going to be presented on Broadway. But the vehicle turned into a pumpkin: Lights saw his work altered beyond recognition, then taken away from him and totally rewritten by John LaTouch. It was renamed THE VAMP, starred Carol Charming, and was a dismal four-hundred-thousand-dollar failure that folded soon after opening.

Fred was given a financial settlement, but no amount of money could heal his wounded soul. The experience thoroughly demoralized him. Ellen told John Gruen in a 1969 *New York Herald Tribune* interview, "It closed something in Fred...He hated everybody in the world. He was so crushed. Throughout the years I wondered how I could get him interested in writing plays again. He wouldn't even pick up a pencil. He wouldn't discuss theater...He felt betrayed...It was really my brother who is responsible for everything that happened to me in the theater." But she failed to persuade him to return to playwrighting; it was one of her very few failures—and the most heartbreaking. (He eventually became a stage manager for the National Broadcasting Company).

In the time Ellen had returned from Tangier, she'd met other young theater writers besides Foster and Alexander, like Bruce Kessler and Don Julian, and was attracting a whole stable of new playwrights. Her friend Joe Cino had the only coffee house theater in Greenwich Village then, but her young charges felt too inexperienced to approach him about presenting their plays. The solution was in that basement on Ninth Street. She would create a place where they could learn their craft, away from the glare of crippling criticism.

The basement wasn't that easy to come by, however. It had been a convenient tax deduction for the landlord, and the sign had obviously been there for a long time. When she approached him that day, he refused at first. But she screamed that he was balking at giving her a lease because she was black.

"No," he replied, "you can't have a lease because the place is a mess. It has to be fixed up first."

But she was adamant and refused to leave the premises until he gave in. He did, and she paid him the fifty-dollar rent for that month in cash from her purse. She crossed to Norman's shop, went in, and found a Chagall lithograph to meditate on awhile, then went home a new person. That was the beginning of Ellen Stewart, impresario to the world.

“So I had my basement,” she told Gruen. “No floor. No plumbing. No nothing. But to me it looked beautiful. I called some friends. They took a dim view of my basement. But they all pitched in.”

They poured concrete, laid floors, and built walls with five-hundred bricks hand-carried from the Bellevue Hospital construction site many blocks away. Ellen and Paul Foster installed the plumbing. When it was complete, the first bit of decoration to be hung on the walls was a wheel from a pushcart, and it became the symbol of the theater. It had been given her by another person she’d met in her early wanderings named Henry, who was one of the last of the old time pushcart makers. The boutique part didn’t materialize beyond a few orders for custom coats that a couple Madison Avenue shops bought for two-hundred dollars and sold for three-hundred. Ellen supported herself (and her theater) thereafter by free-lance designing.

The neighbors were less than overjoyed at having this exotic female and her questionable entourage of young men in their midst; one of them called the City Health Department to report that a Negress had set up a parlor and was entertaining men there—fifteen in six hours! The department sent an inspector over who, it developed, was a former actor himself. He looked around and saw immediately that it was a theater, but he had to have a name for it to write on the report. Until then no one had given it a thought. A few of the young playwrights working nearby overheard the conversation and one of them yelled, “Hey, Mama!”, the nick-name, along with “Earth Mother” that everyone called Ellen. The inspector said it wasn’t bad, but didn’t sound classy enough. “Let’s fancy it up. Call it LA Mama. Or better, Café La MaMa.” And so the name was born.

The basement had been leased in September 1961, and the first play presented there in July 1962. It was an adaptation of a Tennessee Williams short story entitled ONE ARM, and boasted one prop—a single bed—on a playing space not much larger. The bed was, in fact, the only prop that La MaMa owned, so it was imperative that, at least for the near future, all subsequent plays include a bed as the main focal point. Ellen remembered that every scene took place, “Under the bed, around the bed, and on the bed. We also had a lot of gory murder plays, and Paul Foster was always the one who would play the man who gets killed. He would come out screaming from the john (our dressing room) covered with ketchup.” A capacity crowd of twenty-five managed to crawl in from the street through the trap door for the first performance. Dancer/choreographer Jougla Dunn was said to remark once, concerning performing in New York, the great thing was that you could do *anything* there and *someone* would show up to see it. Here was proof positive—and without a bit of advertising.

The first original play was put on the following August: A CORNER OF THE MORNING by Michael Locascio, who later returned to set up his own avant-garde theater company in his native Mexico. But, by far, the most memorable of the early productions was Harold Pinter’s THE ROOM, performed in November 1962—not for the outstanding production, but because one day, during rehearsals, an elegantly attired man and two women visited the basement unannounced. He imperiously demanded to see the “MaMa woman,” and continued saying he planned to sue her if she didn’t cancel plans to do HIS play. Pinter was about to have his first New York production performed at the Cherry Lane Theater in the West Village, and indicated he had no intentions of letting this “grubby little hole in the wall” steal that exclusive moment.

“I confessed I was the ‘MaMa woman,’” said Stewart. “He was greatly appalled and forbade me to do the play. And I said, ‘But you can’t because I plan to do ALL your plays here!’”

Of the two ladies with him, the one in the tweed suit turned out to be his current wife, actress Vivien Merchant; the other, dolled up in a long fur piece, got into the act next by screaming that SHE was his American agent and that even HE couldn’t do his plays in New York without her tacit approval, and she had no intention of allowing his plays to be done in THAT place.

Pinter, astounded at the agent’s presumption, turned his ire from Ellen to her, yelling back, “Since when can Harold Pinter NOT put on his own work anywhere he wishes?...And how DARE you...”

The shouting match continued between Pinter and the agent until, in the heat of it, he turned to Ellen and said with profoundly polite British decorum, “My dear lady, I hereby give you permission to do THE ROOM as many times as you like—at least until it gets a commercial production. As of the moment, THE ROOM is yours.” And with that he hurriedly spirited his quivering charges away.

The basement theater had a capacity seating of twenty-five, but sometimes as many as sixty bodies squeezed into the space to see the plays; they perched wherever they could—chairs, tables, reclaimed sofas, or stood or squatted on the floor. The numbers were heartening but, unfortunately, the eventual cause for more trouble and harassment. The landlord evicted her at the end of 1963, ostensibly under pressure from city officials who claimed overcrowding, and the fact that the basement was intended solely for living purposes, but many felt he was worried about what large crowds might do in such a small space if provoked. On their part, the officials soon reversed their edict and deemed it legal to have a “coffee-theater” there after all; but by then Ellen had taken down the pushcart wheel, rolled it over to 80 Second Avenue, and hung it on the wall of a second-floor loft in a space she’d just found that was five times bigger than the basement.

Her “biddies,” the playwrights, went right along with her, and in no time they had created another workable theater. Flushed with experience, they even attempted some of the more complicated renovations on their own: Ellen, Paul Foster, and Sam Shepard (a new “child” who had recently been introduced to her by Allen Ginsburg) were proud as peacocks of their do-it-yourself plumbing repairs, until they discovered on working the handle of the toilet that everything flushed the wrong way! They would have liked to flush away (wrong way or right) the bothersome city officials who continued buzzing around like flies at a picnic; there was almost no letup to their persecution. As at the basement, they first okayed the new space for theater operations, then rescinded the order; the city, it was explained, had made a rare mistake. Sorry, but that space could only be used for living purposes, and, therefore, must be vacated immediately. Ellen balked. She’d had just about enough and adamantly refused to budge. Somewhere she’d learned that they couldn’t kick her out for hosting a continuous private party, and so she began lacing the entertainments with free coffee and stopped charging dues or admission fees, and she was safe for another six months. But then the Fire Department reappeared on cue and declared the place a fire trap. It was closed and La MaMa was evicted.

“They sealed all the doors,” Ellen recalled with devilish pleasure, “which I used to unseal each night with a steam iron hitched up to a plug in the hall. We’d go inside and rehearse. When we left, I’d seal the doors up again.”

She’d made many friends during her brief stormy career as an Off Off Broadway producer, some in high places, and they came to her rescue—as they would time and time again. They petitioned Mayor Robert Wagner to allow La MaMa to continue, and that got results: not long afterwards someone called from the municipal building to say that, although she couldn’t qualify for a coffee-house License, she could open up again if she made La MaMa a *private club*. Needless to say, she followed instructions implicitly and was back in business (as a private club) in a few weeks, only to be told there could not be a private club on the premises without a certificate of occupancy that would only be issued after certain major repairs were made—not only to her loft, but throughout the building. On learning that, the landlord proceeded to raise her rent, despite her offer to pay all costs.

The city then pronounced the back wall too weak for safety and insisted on its removal. The landlord complied, and La MaMa was left with a performing area exposed to the elements. For the next two months, volunteers took turns sleeping there overnight to protect the costumes and props from pilferers and rain, as Ellen was pelted with ever more regulations.

“Finally, I was told by the Licensing Department that if I had one more conviction, I’d be a felon and wouldn’t be able to do anything more in New York. The pressures were mounting. One night we were performing Paul Foster’s BALLS (the cast consisted of two ping pong balls). I was told the marshals were coming to close me down that night. I made an announcement to the audience. I told them to pick up the tables, chairs, paintings

on the walls, and follow me. They did. One lady, carrying out one of the big round tables while tottering on very high heels down the stairs, turned to the person nearest her and said, 'Do you do this often?'

"They followed me down to 122 Second Avenue," Stewart marveled, admitting that the move was something of a secret she had been working on for several weeks. "We were out of there in an hour. When the marshals came the place was bone clean. They didn't know where I had gone. But we never stopped operation. The production of new plays went on uninterrupted."

She was immediately sued by the former landlord for one-thousand-three-hundred-fifty dollars for allegedly depriving him of rent paid by a tenant who had been residing in his building illegally and had been evicted after investigations from various city agencies. It seemed she couldn't escape persecution, no matter where she moved.

The newest, and by far the most permanent home so far was another unlikely setting—a former band rehearsal hall and pool parlor above a dry cleaning establishment. Getting there was half the fun. On Second Avenue's east side, midway between St. Mark's Place and Seventh Street, was an unimposing set of battle scarred doors, squeezed between the cleaner's window ("One Hour Martinizing") and an optometrist's office ("H. H. Burdick, O.D. Eyes Examined), with the legend "122 Delivery Entrance" crudely applied at eye level (Stewart never did add La MaMa's name to it). Once inside, a narrow hall was filled with a perilously steep bank of stairs ending up breathlessly at another metal door that in turn opened onto a room shaped like a twenty-five-foot by one-hundred-foot version of one of the shoe boxes Ellen and her brother created scenes in as youngsters. Along the wall by the entrance were a sink counter framed with posters, a refrigerator, hot plate, pay phone and a lavatory with a tiny dressing area. As usual, all her "children" pitched in again to make it a theater. They stripped the entire length of the opposite wall to expose the bricks (bare bricks were the most noticeable design feature of La MaMa's dwelling places, as if getting down to the essential elements of construction served as a metaphor, somehow, for the kind of theater that was being strived for within its confines), and then adorned it with a large black and white plaque announcing "La MaMa." The ceiling was also relieved of its fake tin cover-up. They even re-laid the floors, which had roller coaster contours, and, with left-over wood, built their first-ever real stage. The playwriting elves chopped down an old three-seat shoe-shine stand and slapped a marble counter on top to make a coffee bar; then brought in posters and paintings and hung a nude sculpture from the rafters. One of them, Leonard Melfi, was lucky enough to be working at the moment at a door store, so he contributed the lumber for the small individual café tables, then helped fabricate them. (When they were finished and in place, he became the chief waiter.)

The performance stage was in the very center of the room, with broad banked platforms rising at both ends holding, in all, seventy-two chairs with almost that many low tables between, topped with candles. Behind the last row of seats a prop storage area was concealed by a screen made of old stage flats, that also partitioned off a dressing room of sorts hung all around with speckled mirrors and dotted with odd-sized stools.

There was no office space at all, but that didn't hobble Ellen Stewart, the invincible. Every evening, just as the performances got under way, she would flick the switch that turned off the fake Tiffany ceiling fixtures, quietly step out onto the hall landing, and close the metal door behind her. She then perched about halfway down the stairs with her ubiquitous pouch open at her feet, and began plowing through all the "ditties," as she called them, of her business: new scripts, bills, and, ever-increasingly, bundles of correspondence from all over the world that she read carefully and always answered. These were her office hours, and it was understood that, at those times, actors and playwrights could approach and discuss their projects or their lives—they were equally important to "MaMa" and she would dispense maternal wisdom and advice freely in finger-to-lips whispers (the play was never allowed to be disturbed). Often a whole coterie of her writers would be ensconced on the stairs around her; some whispering, some writing, and, adding an eccentric touch to the already bizarre setting, several of the young men could occasionally be seen engrossed in various stages of knitting.

That domestic tranquility lasted for a year. Then the pesky bureaucratic flies came buzzing around again. The city fathers had contrived another scheme to complicate things. This one became the notorious Great Coffee-House Conflict. In the last few years they had slowly become aware of a new kind of entertainment phenomenon cropping up mainly in the East and West Village, but also gaining footholds uptown. For want of a better term, they called it a “coffee house,” mainly because it didn’t fit neatly within the regulations governing restaurants: in addition to food (albeit mostly coffee and cocoa), it presented entertainment that exceeded the acceptable “background music of no more than three stringed instruments.”

Some of the new breed, like Deux Magots and LeMetro on the lower east side, were centers of poetry reading. Others, like Gaslight on MacDougal Street, presented some of the best serious folk music around, while a few others, namely La MaMa and Caffé Cino, presented experimental theater with the cream and sugar. Unfortunately however, a growing number of these establishments were merely gussied-up sleaze clubs, cashing in on a trend by offering phony “poetry” and “folk music” to the unsuspecting passersby at rip-off prices. Situated mainly south of Washington Square, they centered around MacDougal Street, which, in only a couple years was transformed from a typical Greenwich Village thoroughfare to a noisy, honkytonk carnival playground, lined both sides with schlock shops and these self-cloning “coffee houses,” complete with barkers outside luring the customers in, and loudspeakers turned up to earsplitting decibels.

Local residents were understandably incensed and began badgering the bureaucracy to do something about it. The city responded with a new “Coffee-House” category, placing it just under a restaurant and just this side of a cabaret. The new law did nothing to relieve the beleaguered MacDougal Street residents—the noise and sleaze continued unabated there. But it did inflict more harassment on the Gaslight, Cino, La MaMa and LeMetro. (The latter sued and eventually won the right to hold poetry readings again.) It prohibited them from operating without the new license, which, of course, became impossible for them to obtain. (The new regulation, for example, forbade a raised stage, and allowed no more than three performers.)

For once, Stewart won out over the licensers. She discovered that the space she was renting had once been used by the American Labor Party as a clubroom, and that, by retaining similar usage, she wouldn’t have to conform to the Draconian regulations. That was when Café La MaMa became Café La MaMa E.T.C.—Experimental Theater Club, with the emphasis on Club. Audiences attending performances thereafter were members, paying dues of one dollar a week instead of an admission charge. One became a member in a strictly formal way (after what she had been through, Ellen wasn’t about to do anything now that wasn’t by the book). First, by showing up during performances one week at her office-on-the-stairs, you filled out an application form and received a membership card. But you were not allowed to see *that* performance. You had to wait until the next week or thereafter, and call first for reservations. It was truly amazing how many souls found their way there and joined up, when first of all, you had to know the unmarked address, and then go through all that rigmarole to see a production, which, as many found, could be less than satisfying after you got there. But it was the only way she felt she could operate legally under the private club framework. By 1967 there were, astoundingly, over three-thousand members, arriving either by word of mouth or the tiny ads she placed weekly in *The Village Voice*. Such luminaries as Peter Brook, Peter Weiss, Jerome Robbins, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein, among many others, became card-carrying members. There was no charge for coffee and hot chocolate, but a basket was passed around at the end of every performance to help defray the costs of the sets.

The seemingly endless Kafkaesque scenario between La MaMa and the municipal bureaucrats resumed once more, beginning with a visit from the Fire Department and a verdict of guilty of defective wiring. The “children” staged a benefit and raised enough instant cash (seven-hundred-thirty-two dollars) to have it fixed right away. The day after she got the letter saying it had passed inspection, Stewart received notification that she had to file for a certificate of occupancy for the premises, which she did. Next came a notice from the sales and amusement tax division of the Department of Finance charging her four-hundred-thirty-nine dol-

lars in unpaid taxes on six-thousand dollars—an amount she never made. From the start La MaMa had been totally financed by Ellen alone from her earnings (by that time she was designing bathing suits for a Brooklyn manufacturer), and, since she had been unable to obtain a coffee house license, and had been forced to convert it to a private club, she was not allowed to charge for the coffee she distributed or even its cost. So she had been paying for that out of pocket, too. The Finance boys couldn't seem to grasp the concept of someone doing something out of pure love. They assumed that if she bought a certain amount of coffee, then she must be selling it by the cup to her customers. They came up with the profit figure of six-thousand dollars by ascertaining how much one of the other coffee houses charged per cup (it was one of the blatantly commercial MacDougal Street establishments), and multiplied it by the number of cups it figured would be made from the coffee La MaMa purchased. The four-hundred-thirtynine dollar tax they came up with might as well have been five-thousand dollars; Ellen Stewart couldn't pay it, no matter what the sum. She said at the time, in one of the atypical moments of temporary depression on record, "La MaMa is supposed to be non-profit. And that is *truly* so."

Soon after that the Licensing Department inspector showed up in the middle of a performance of Paul Foster's first full-length play, *THE MADONNA IN THE ORCHARD*. Why, no one could fathom. Since La MaMa was by then a private club, it should have been no concern of his. But, like "Dem Bones," de Licensing Department was connected to de Building Department, de Building Department was connected to de Fire Department, etc., and it followed that you couldn't be harassed by one without the others. That time the inspector was encouraged to leave peacefully without a prolonged interruption of the play. But it did seem to all concerned that the City of New York was making a concerted effort to thwart the very creative resources it advertised to the world as its main assets. It was hoped that the new mayor, John V. Lindsay, would prove to be more sympathetic and sensitive to the arts than the previous administration had been. (He was, but it took time and more agony before some of the municipal departments abandoned their police state tactics.)

Ellen Stewart and her stalwart bank of playwrights—there were soon to be upwards of two hundred of them—were subjected to more civic bullying. The Fire Department moved in again and closed the theater down. It had condemned every electric outlet and socket in the place, except one overhead light in the john. It insisted all new cables had to be installed "IN THE GROUND"—a horrendous expense. The estimate was nine-thousand dollars for all new wiring. Robert Patrick, later acclaimed for his hit play *KENNEDY'S CHILDREN* (1975), mustered thirty other playwrights to join him in writing one three-minute skit each to form a revue they could present to raise the money. It was titled *BANG*, and everyone connected with it worked round the clock for five days straight to get it in shape. Between performances, actors took to the aisles and fanned out over the audience literally begging for donations. As usual, they raised just enough to get the job done, then, as usual, went on with the business of making plays.

Ellen Stewart had long felt that a play should not be presented for longer than one week, possibly two, at a time. She believed her "biddies" could learn all they needed to know about their work in that time. As a result, reading new plays took up most of her "free" time, which meant the long subway jaunts five mornings a week to her current money-making job in Brooklyn; first on the D train to Burrough Hall, then transferring to the A train to Clinton and Washington, she'd dip into her straw shopping bag and pore over script after script. On entering the slum-surrounded factory in Brooklyn, she became Ellie, bathing suit designer, and put away her plays until the ride home at night: Ellie and her "Tahiti Original." (She was credited later by the fashion industry for having invented the tuck in men's bathing suits to give them a little bounce in the behind, and also for being one of the first to work in Lycra fabric.)

After dark, she'd make the transition again to theatrical producer, and by the time she'd arrive back in the East Village, she was the acknowledged Queen of Off Off Broadway, doyenne of the avant-garde.

In later years she gave a pat explanation for her unorthodox choices of plays. It went something like: contemporary standard Broadway fare dealt with man's "conscious receptivity"; her playwrights, whom she cat-

egorized as the New Theater, were interested in man's "unconscious receptivity." She picked every play that was presented, and, in spite of her theories, her choices were sometimes incomprehensible to everyone else. Entirely unschooled in the theater, she—and I believe I took after her there—had a "sense" about it. She could visualize it being performed in her mind as she read each script. She was asked often about making choices and her reply was at once ingenuous and disarming, "I just love theater. It's like a burning thing. I don't like to act and I don't like to write, but I like to see it born, to come to life. The playwrights are to me some of the most interesting people. I learn something every day. [They] don't give you something to understand so much as a reaction. It's an emotional reaction...You become a playwright...Maybe you like it and maybe you don't. But you will ponder it over and, maybe three weeks from now—bingo!—something will happen that will answer it. The playwright is unbearable; he doesn't leave you alone."

She spoke of scripts "beeping" to her as she read them, which meant that those that did were the ones that would be presented. And once she was convinced of a play's potential, she never changed her mind. The same thing held true, of course, for the ones that didn't "beep" to her. Leonard Melfi said "...if she thinks a play shouldn't be done, it won't be done, and you can't make her do it. She's very emotional and mystical—and stubborn." (I could sympathize with Melfi. I was to become an expert on that stubbornness later.)

Because the choices were always hers, they were far from infallible. The quality of any given fare at La MaMa was always up for grabs: one week, stupendous, the next downright embarrassing. *The Village Voice* critic Joseph LeSueur wrote that, although he understood the situation, he would have liked the odds to be a little more in the audience's favor, maybe one hit for every sixth flop. Jerry Tallmer in the *New York Post* (August 2, 1966) put the odds slightly differently, but agreed he was willing to accept ten or twenty good shows for every two hundred presented.

The most difficult task at the moment was finding directors who could relate to this New Theater. After choosing the plays, Ellen stepped aside and insisted the playwrights mount their work singlehandedly. She even went so far as to refuse to attend any but the last performances so she could not possibly interfere—a practice she adhered to for twenty-five years. She even claimed to me that she never even saw any of one writer's plays, so confident was she of the playwright's ability to recreate the visions in her mind from reading the scripts. She was nothing if not trusting; when she liked you, you could do no wrong.

The playwrights chose their own directors, casts, and set and lighting designers. Then everyone, Stewart included, took hammers to nails to assist them. In the beginning, the writers' directed their own plays. Some, like Sam Shepard (in 1966 at age twenty-two), found that early experience invaluable in the future. His plays, as impressive then as later (UP TO THURSDAY, CHICAGO, DOG) were such, however, that no other directors then could figure out how to present them. As a result, in subsequent decades, he personally directed some of the most vivid productions of his work, utilizing all he had learned at La MaMa. When asked once why he chose the Off Off Broadway route, he answered, "I love Off Off Broadway. There's no compromise. You rely on the interests of certain small audiences in the avant-garde and the experimental. I never tried Broadway because I think they would hate me... [Off Off Broadway] might turn out as popular as Off Broadway, and then die out. Then, Off Off Off Broadway would start, and it could go on and on like that—and that's not bad." (Interview in *Mademoiselle*, March 1966.)

Eventually the right directors emerged from the ranks: Ross Alexander, Paul Morel, Lawrence Kornfeld, Cliff Toby, S. S. Walter, and, probably most importantly for La MaMa's near future, Tom O'Horgan. He was to give it its special style by developing the La MaMa Troupe, a loose affiliation of acting talents brought together to work out new techniques for presenting the new plays. It was followed soon after by La MaMa Plexus, a smaller group of ten actors and one director, Stanley Rosenberg, and after that by La MaMa Ensemble, directed by Edward Setrakian.

Like everyone else in the company, actors were not paid (Actors Equity would do something about that later), therefore the acting standards were as erratic as the scripts. Almost any interested enough party with

the nerve to stand up there and emote got a chance to perform. It became a great proving ground, and some really talented young performers began to emerge: George Bartenieff (who would soon form his own company, Theater For the New City), Seth Allen, Gretel Cummings, Victor Lipari, Barbara Young, Marilyn Chris, and Kevin O'Connor, as well as Sam Shepard himself, who would become as well-known for his acting roles in films in the 1980s as for his plays.

Though a few of the “children” were gaining some measure of recognition—Lanford Wilson and Shepard were singled out to have work presented by Edward Albee’s and Richard Barr’s Theater 1965 at the Cherry Lane Theater—Ellen Stewart figured the best way she could get them known was to have their scripts published. But publishers were only interested in plays that had been reviewed, and in those days no uptown critics darkened La MaMa’s door. Even *The Village Voice*, where she placed small weekly ads, sent reviewers only occasionally. She had learned somewhere that in Europe critics saw and wrote about everything. So, in September 1965, a student ship set sail from New York harbor with sixteen La MaMa regulars and twenty plays, along with props, curtains, and costumes. Destination: Paris, France, with a side trip by another troupe to Copenhagen, Denmark, led by Tom O’Horgan.

On board with Stewart were Jean-Claude van Itallie, Adrienne Kennedy, Lanford Wilson, Sam Shepard, Leonard Melfi, and Paul Foster, along with actors and technicians. Some of the scripts they planned to present were: van Itallie’s AMERICA HURRAH!; Melfi’s BIRD BATH; RAT’S MASS by Kennedy; Wilson’s THIS IS RILL SPEAKING; and Foster’s THE RECLUSE; LITTLE MOTHER, by Ross Alexander; 4H CLUB by Shepard; LULLABY FOR A DYING MAN by Ruth Yorck; THE MADNESS OF LADY BRIGHT, by Lanford Wilson; FRUSTRATA by Tom Eyen; HURRAH FOR THE BRIDGE, by Foster; MY ORPHEUS by Harry Koutoukas; and two extras, HOME FREE! by Wilson, and WAR by van Itallie.

As thrilling as the prospect and eventual trip were, only O’Horgan’s Copenhagen company was a success. The Paris company was not well received—in fact the press was downright hostile and the demoralized troupe simply fell apart when they arrived in Copenhagen to exchange places with O’Horgan’s party. The swap had been carefully choreographed so that all the American playwrights would have work seen in both venues. But O’Horgan revamped his group, taking five actors with him to Paris in a reduced program, and actually won over the Parisian audiences. In fact the run was not only extended, but the group was invited back to Denmark and toured the countryside until spring 1966. When the money ran out the O’Horgan troupe returned to New York and performed six of the original twenty plays at the Café. The production was later moved to Off Broadway for a short unsuccessful commercial run at the Martinique Theater by Theodore Mann and his associate from Circle in the Square, Paul Libin.

In the fall of 1966 La MaMa set out on tour of Europe again, this time appearing in Belgrade, Stockholm, and Nottingham and Durham, England. Ellen paid all the expenses herself, except for local transportation that was arranged free of charge by the participating countries.

Back home again, Stewart was hit almost immediately by another broadside, this time from an unlikely quarter. Just when municipal officiousness seemed to have gone into temporary remission, Actors Equity took up the lethal wrecker’s ball and heaved it right for the solar plexus. The union became aware of the proliferation of coffee house theaters and workshops and, because its actors were being used in some of the performances, decided to get in on the action. It decreed that none of its members could appear in any of the productions unless they were paid the standard, accepted, Off Broadway minimum wages. It was not to be the first time that Equity would adopt the aggressive tactics of other workers’ unions without consideration of the fact that theater was a very different operation, one that relied on the freedom from restraints on all sides in order to serve the creative forces.

It would have been impossible for La MaMa or any of the other coffee houses to comply, even for one week. What at first appeared to be just another annoying obstacle in the process of making theater became instead



Ellen Stewart (1992) before 1965 photo of: l-r, Sam Shepard; Tom O'Horgan; Stewart; Rita Howard, actress; Brice Howard, Exec. Dir., N.E.T.;
(last two unidentified)

photo: Don Hogan Charles for the New York Times

a life-or-death crisis.

Ellen Stewart again rose to the occasion, went before Equity, and argued the case for coffee house theater with her customary (she'd by now had a lot of practice) fearless eloquence. Equity capitulated and consented to a Showcase Code—still in effect throughout the time-span of this book—by which union actors were allowed to appear in runs limited to a maximum ten performances where no regular admission was charged (passing the basket was not regular admission). Equity players, who had had to patiently wait out one more front office crisis in the wings, eagerly returned to working the coffee houses again without pay, while a peaceful, if brief hiatus followed.

Artistically, La MaMa regulars Rochelle Owens and Sam Shepard shared the 1966 Obie Award for Best Play. His *LA TURISTA* was slated to be presented soon, but when he was offered one-thousand dollars by Wynn Handman to allow it to be produced at The American Place, Ellen encouraged him to take it there. It was the first real money he received for playwrighting.

Still convinced that the best way for her young playwrights to get to the American public was through a European window, Stewart launched another ship in 1967. It was the most successful tour of all and lasted for five months. Seven plays were presented by six writers at five international theater festivals that summer and fall, including Spoleto, Italy, and the already famous Edinburgh Festival in Scotland, as well as the Frankfurt Experimental Theatre Festival in Germany. This time the playwrights included were: Sam Shepard with *MELODRAMA PLAY*; Paul Foster and *TOM PAINE*; Leonard Melfi with *TIME SQUARE*; Tom Eyan and *THE WHITE WHORE AND THE BIT PLAYER*. There was a new work by Lanford Wilson,

called UNTITLED PLAY; and, most exciting and controversial of all, the other recent Obie winner, FUTZ by Rochelle Owens. (Tom O'Horgan had won the Best Director award for it, and Seth Allen was cited for Best Performance as the play's lead character.)

The actors in the company included, besides Allen, Kevin O'Connor, Jerry Cunliffe, Rob Thirkield, Michael Warren Powell, Beth Porter, and John Bakos. Also appearing were Victor Lipari, Blanche Dee, Peter Craig, Beverly Atkinson, Mari-Claire Charba, Shellie Feldman, and Marilyn Roberts. With director Tom O'Horgan, there was Lighting Designer Laura Rambaldi and Set Designer Hamish Henderson.

By late August the La MaMa troupe arrived in Edinburgh, set up shop in Barrie Halls, and became the hit of the festival. Two of the plays, TOM PAINE (Foster) and FUTZ (Owens) turned into the biggest sell-outs (and scandals) of the season there, and later, in London. Ronald Bryden writing in *The Observer* in London on August 27, gushed, "But the sensation of the Festival, deservedly, is the La MaMa troupe. Edinburgh wouldn't be itself without a scandal, and the La MaMas provide it with a play called FUTZ, attacked as pornography by the *Scottish Daily Express* with urgent representations that it be banned by the local magistrate.

"In fact, it's a stunningly satirical discussion of pornography. Farmer Futz, a kind of 'sick, gentle' Dogpatch Peter Grimes, heats the tempers and imaginations of his neighbors by carrying on an idyllic love affair with his pig (Amanda). Fathers paw daughters lasciviously; a mother-fixated moron murders a girl who leads him on in the moonlight. With a cry of 'You make my brain red,' Futz is lynched by the community who blame him for the thoughts he puts into their heads."

Alan Riddell of the *Daily Telegraph* of August 23 chimed, "It is unlikely that any other dramatic event at this year's festival will be as stunning as the production, by the La MaMa Experimental Theater Club of New York, of Rochelle Owens' FUTZ which opened at the Barrie Halls last night.

"To begin with, the play itself has all the ingredients of a success de scandale: rape, incest, bestiality, and ritual murder. But these are miraculously transcended in a cry for compassion and tolerance powerful enough to borrow images from the high Renaissance and not be humbled by the loan...the production is deceptively simple, the players sit around a small raised platform, like a boxing ring without ropes, the men in jeans and T-shirts, the women in plain blouses and knee-length skirts. There is a suggestion of group theatre improvisation as one or more of their number move on to the platform to enact the story while the others sit at their feet and watch.

"But as the skein of violence unravels, the seated players become both chorus and participants. Their movements, based on the rhythms of modern American dance choreography, symbolically reflect the action. Muted folk songs and the keening of the Negro spiritual add another dimension.

"We have heard a lot lately about American experimental theatre. The new expressionism of the La MaMa group, under their director Tom O'Horgan, amply justified this."

On the other hand, trying to get FUTZ banned in Edinburgh was Bailie Mrs. Mary Robertson Murray. In a lead article in the *Scottish Express*, a reporter wrote, "Last night Lord Provost Brechin said that in regard to Bailie Mrs. Murray's approach on the FUTZ play, a report was still awaited from the police."

Prodded again by the formidable lady over words used in Paul Foster's TOM PAINE, the Lord Chamberlain was forced to make another decision, which the same article covered. "Festival play TOM PAINE—said to be 'a stronger meat' than the lusty play FUTZ—should only have 'a few words' deleted.

"This is the Lord Chamberlain's suggestion for the official Festival play. "And yesterday author Mr. Paul Foster and producer Mr. Tom O'Horgan said they were 'delighted'."

TOM PAINE was every bit as sensational, if somewhat less scandalous, as FUTZ. The Lord Chamberlain's presence usually had the same effect as a cold shower in London theaters, he being the queen's official censor. But the publicity only prompted sell-out crowds at the Church Hill Theatre. Walter Reid in *The Scotsman*

wrote, "Café La MaMa are all movement, fluidity, ballet. Leaping around the dimly lit stage like little black devils, they form and reform into one image after another...This is the 'Rights of Man' by Batman and Robin, but it's also true to the feel of the eighteenth century in its lusty irreverence. Many scenes could be East End tavern entertainment.

"Paul Foster thinks it is significant that Paine is almost a forgotten figure in America today, but he doesn't eulogize him unreasonably, presenting him as a lascivious drunkard shadowed, but never fused with, his reputation. Kevin O'Connor plays Tom as a lumbering, leering caveman."

The troupe first appeared in the small, cramped Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill on arrival in London, under the auspices of the International Theatre Club. Then it moved to the roomier Vaudeville Theatre in Strand for a longer stay in October, where Irving Wardle of *The London Times* crowed on October 18, "First seen at the Edinburgh Festival, TOM PAINE is much the best text in the repertoire of the La MaMa troupe, but, as before, the company counts more than the playwright...They have the acrobatic techniques to create a storm-tossed ship, a bear pit, or a palace interior from a few multi-purpose props...They transmit strong individual personalities, and share the ability to drop into private discussion without losing the thread of public performance."

The trade journal *The Stage* agreed, "The troupe's strength lies in ensemble playing, which is relaxed and has a special kind of intimacy about it on a personal as well as an acting level."

Ellen and her company hoped for, but never expected to get, such coverage. Even when the critics were less than thrilled about some of the other plays, the publicity their articles generated created an instant following for the troupe in London. For example, Shepard's MELODRAMA PLAY was termed by most reviewers a tedious bit of soul-searching among musical hippies, looking for that other hit tune before their star wanes, that trailed off into a psychologically tortuous nightmare of eventual madness; the sold-out houses loved it.

Melfi's TIMES SQUARE was described in *Plays & Players* in November as "...a kind of choreography of human boredom...TIMES SQUARE looks like one of those improvised games which La MaMa often play on their audiences... A group of fantasy worshipers, their eyes dazed with movie-going and their stomachs filled with cool afternoon-cocktails, wander about Forty-second Street bemoaning the passing of the gilded life... (They) become desperate to find distractions: they drink, play games, invent a fantasy 'lilac tree' under which they can make love. It's very gentle, very pretentious and very sad... Suddenly you see that the elaborate improvisation has dealt with the fact of improvisation itself: for the most part we live out improvised desires around a Manhattan lilac tree." Sell out!

Eric Shorter summed up the impact the La MaMa troupe had on London, "They are sensational. There is no other word."

By the beginning of 1968, the ensemble was back home and performing again at 122 Second Avenue. La MaMa was gaining wider recognition because of the tour. There were newspaper and magazine articles; critics began to take notice (albeit mostly from afar); and more theatergoers discovered the secret double doors and climbed up to join the club. Ellen Stewart continued to exist as she had for years, namely, for La MaMa and her "biddies." She lived in a fourth floor walk-up railroad flat on East Fifth Street, very similar to the one I occupied on Barrow Street. Cluttered with scripts, paintings, letters, a huge dog named Bobo, a parrot named Ringo, a bowl of fish, the three-room space was also a temporary crash pad for any playwright or artist who needed creative space. She had one section of it converted into tiny cubicles, providing quarters for a playwright, a painter, and a poet. At any given time in the mid-to-late sixties one might encounter Paul Foster, or Tom O'Horgan, actor Kevin O'Connor, or painter Jim Moore, all who once lived there, along with any transient traveling troupes visiting from all over the world. In 1967, ten actors from Lima, Peru, followed by a twelve-member group from Bogota, Colombia, bedded down in sleeping bags there for several weeks. When asked where she put all those bodies, she mused, like the old lady who lived in a shoe, "We manage. Every bed's got another bed underneath it you can pull out." And, likely as not, she ended up making dinner

for all of them as well.

A typical weekday for Ellen began about 10:00 A.M. when she arose and quietly nibbled a breakfast of chocolate doughnuts and coffee. It was the only serene moment she would have until bedtime. For soon the phone would begin ringing and her business schedule was under way: an agency calling for the phone number of one of her “biddies”; another coffee house owner wanting to borrow costumes; an overseas call to firm up the dates of an upcoming tour, etc., etc. And in between, calls from department stores for her fashion designs.

Eventually, around noon, she would set out for her job on University Place in Greenwich Village, a few blocks from Washington Square. She had left the bathing suit factory in Brooklyn to design playwear for a manufacturer named Joe Bijou, who, she admitted, had to be the most understanding boss in history, because anywhere Stewart went, La MaMa went also. That meant her playwrights dropped in often, and actors appeared or phoned regularly.

“Sure I’m a satellite,” shrugged Joe. “With Ellen everything overlaps. She’s a many-faceted person; she attracts people from many different worlds, and it all goes into her designs. Her hours don’t bother me. I don’t employ her for the hours. I can get a lot of people for the hours. But there’s only one Ellen.”

Around 6:00 P.M., she would clear off her drawing table and head for Second Avenue, where she immersed herself in the nightly business of her theater. The first order of the evening was to clean the lavatory before show-time. Next she would check the candles on the low tables to see they were all in place and long enough to last the performance. Then she was ready to handle all the endless little crises that always developed backstage, before tip-toeing out at curtain time to her office on the stairs. When the performances were over, it was she who swept up, doused the lights, and locked the doors. She seldom ever left before 11:00 P.M.

Back at the flat she would read more scripts before retiring about 3:00 A.M.—that was if there weren’t performers from the other coffee houses dropping in to relax and talk shop in what was a more or less permanent floating family reunion. Saturdays were devoted full-time to her design job. Sundays were supposed to be for rest and catching up on new scripts. But as likely as not, when she returned from Mass (in all the years I knew her she rarely missed a weekly service when she wasn’t ill), there would be a gathering of her playwrights around the large circular table in the kitchen, arguing and talking animatedly about their latest work. It was the best way she had to personally see all of them at least once a month or so and keep up with their activities.

La MaMa really came of age over the Second Avenue dry cleaners. Ellen was right about her playwrights finding their audiences in New York after having been recognized first abroad. Any young classical singer or instrumentalist of that time (or later for that matter) could have told her she was doing the right thing; for years they had had to do the same. It is no credit to the American culture that we have never seemed to embrace the exceptional talent right before our eyes until it has been proven first in the concert halls of Germany or Austria or the opera houses of Milan, Paris or London. And, sad to say, when we finally do, it is often too late: the bloom is off. But not in this case.

The La MaMa troupe returned with an added luster that proved irresistible to audiences at home. The American press had followed its successes—and scandals—all over Europe and whetted appetites to see what all the raving was about.

The stairs at 122 became the Spanish Steps of the alternative theater world. People from everywhere and all walks of life passed each other on the way to experiencing the latest experimental phenomenon. It was no longer the bastion of thong-sandaled Village long-hairs: everyone from college professors and their students, to rock stars and their groupies, to out-of-town matinee matrons and curious tourists showed up. Now, even uptown critics came cautiously to peer over the rim. What they saw was not their cup of tea, but they were assured of one thing: dig it or not, they would find nothing like it anywhere else for sheer excitement—or subject matter.

A disproportionately large number of La MaMa’s young playwrights were homosexual and, under Stewart’s

tutelage, were encouraged to write about gay themes, at a time when such subjects were generally taboo on the stage. Her good friend and colleague Joe Cino had also been sympathetic, and some of the writers who got their start at the Caffé Cino were welcomed to her bosom after he died. One of the most interesting early works of the genre was a slight piece by Lanford Wilson titled *THE MADNESS OF LADY BRIGHT*, a one-act exercise on hidden sexuality worked into a long monologue in which an aging queen named Leslie Bright looks back on his early home life with his mother and sister, and his numerous love affairs. As acted by Cris Alexander in the 1966 production, it was a stunning tour-de-force of pathos and loneliness.

Ruth Yorck, originally an actress who appeared in films directed by Murnau and Dreyer, was an intimate friend of Ellen's, and wrote a provocative play called *LOVE SONG FOR MRS. BOAS*, that was presented the same year. It depicted the biblical Ruth and Naomi as lesbians. After Yorck died, La MaMa mounted an ambitious tribute to this fascinating author and friend of the arts in the spring of 1967, with nine full-length plays under the heading "RUTH YORCK GOLDEN SERIES." Even Joe Papp, taking short leave from his nearby Public Theater, directed one of them—*STOCK UP ON PEPPER CAUSE TURKEY'S GOING TO WAR* by Frank Zajac. He explained his presence at La MaMa with a gruff one-liner, "This is where the action is!"

Twenty-three years later (in 1990) Stewart was forced to defend her decision to sign the National Endowment for the Arts obscenity pledge (Chapter One) to present no work that might be deemed blasphemous or obscene—Congress had placed sexual deviation of any form in both categories—in order to continue obtaining government funding. Of her by then million-dollar-plus budget, two-hundred-twenty-six-thousand dollars came from the NEA, and she was not going to jeopardize such important support. She told a *New York Times* reporter, "Many people expected me to close La MaMa, not sign any papers, but I refused to be a martyr to this cause. I want La MaMa to live. And if I have to work within the confines of censorship at this time I will do it."

She had been no stranger to censorship in her time. During the 1965 European tour, for example, when Jean-Claude van Itallie's *AMERICA HURRAH* was first presented in Paris, the French authorities were so incensed at the play's two robots breaking up a motel room and drawing penises on the walls—a visual statement about the sixties that struck such a raw nerve even at home that it became a benchmark—they confiscated her passport and charged her with pornography.

Audiences at La MaMa got used to—indeed, learned to expect—unusual treatment of unusual material. Sometimes they were even made active participants in the process, Living Theater style. When Arthur Sainer's *THE DAY SPEAKS BUT CANNOT WEEP*, a treatise on LSD drugs, was presented, they were given an hallucinogenic experience. They were herded up onto the stage and bright lights were beamed into their eyes. Distorted pictures were flashed on the ceiling as an ear-piercing, other-worldly wailing emanated from a hidden tape player. Five different stories were enacted from five separate areas of the room simultaneously. For a final boffo touch, the blinking dry cleaner's street sign was turned around to pulse colored streaks throughout the theater's interior. Even in Paul Foster's *TOM PAINE*, director Tom O'Horgan deliberately left areas of the play free for improvisation and audience talk-back.

O'Horgan became La MaMa's first super success story with the block-buster musical hit of the 1967-1968 Broadway season, *HAIR*, which opened just six weeks after the *TOM PAINE* production began its run Off Broadway. With rock-and-roll score by Galt MacDermot and book and lyrics by Gerome Ragni and James Rasdon (who were also leading players), it originated from a sketch done first at La MaMa, and later at Papp's Public Theater under the direction of Gerald Freedman. It was then taken to Broadway where O'Horgan took over directorship and added wild excitement to an already irresistible score. A loose story of a young hippie's anguish over whether or not to resist the Vietnam war draft call, it touched on sex, drugs, and religion in about equal portions. The loud musical numbers, which O'Horgan staged at a relentlessly frenetic pace (the earlier version of Freedman's was more serious and introspective), touched all the current hip concerns; like "Air," about the effects of carbon dioxide; and a love song in which the girl laments that the boy she truly

loves isn't the father of her unborn child; and "Frank Mills," a teenager's fantasy about "doing it" with an older guy. It even had a first-act finale that included the then shocker of all shockers—for Broadway; brightly lit full frontal nudity, male and female, that lasted for a long enough beat to get the whole picture. (It was understood among the cast that the strips weren't mandatory every performance, only when they "felt" like it. But, I noticed, clothing was shed more freely and frequently as the run progressed.)

HAIR was the era's defiant shout at the Establishment and, by all odds, the biggest hit musical to date. And Tom O'Horgan, who was already an accomplished musician and composer, and had once earned a living as a harpist on the college circuit, was the "auteur" of the year. He was to continue down the same glitzy road into the seventies with other blockbusters like LENNY and his greatest success of all, JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR, with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Tim Rice.

When Tom won the 1967 Obie award for Best Director, the La MaMa Troupe, that he helped found and develop, was also given a special citation for "presenting a repertory of distinguished Off Off Broadway plays to European audiences". In fact La MaMa members won six awards in all at that ceremony: besides Owens (Best Play), O'Horgan (Best Director), Seth Allen (Best Actor), and the special citation, there was another special award (the Joseph Cino Memorial) to La MaMa veteran Jeff Weiss for his plays and performances, and a distinguished Performance award to Tom Aldredge for STOCK UP ON PEPPER CAUSE TURKEY'S GOING TO WAR.

Ellen Stewart received further recognition that lucky year 1967 when she was awarded the Brandeis University Creative Arts Citation that included a much-appreciated one-thousand-dollar stipend. But surely her most satisfying reward in a year full of honors was at last seeing one of her playwrights' works published; that had been her ultimate dream for all her "biddies" and the impetus behind the European forays. Now it had happened. Random House Publishers announced in October that it was bringing out two editions of plays in paperback by relative unknowns: Rosalyn Drexler (who was already well-regarded Off Off Broadway since HOME MOVIES won a 1964 Obie for the most distinguished Off Broadway play), with THE LINE OF LEAST EXISTENCE AND OTHER PLAYS; and Leonard Melfi, the same curly haired, young writer who worked part-time at the lumber store, and doubled as the official coffee server at La MaMa, with six one-act plays under the title ENCOUNTERS. Joan Simon in *Life* gave it a rave review, saying Melfi was the first current playwright to focus on real people in real situations, instead of the constant stream of losers and fumbler we'd been recently subject to. And he did it with love and great humor.

With Stewart's predilection for traveling routes with the most road blocks, she couldn't continue cruising smoothly into 1968 for long without being brought up short soon again. In her recent history of woeful encounters that rivaled the Perils of Pauline, (*Village Voice* critic Stephanie Harrington called Ellen's life half drama and half melodrama), the next installment of disaster was about due. And the reasoning behind it was as unfathomable as ever.

The landlord at 122 Second Avenue was not unaware of La MaMa's burgeoning fame, and was beginning to feel that some of it should rub off on him. After all, he was the one who agreed to rent her that space, right? Noting that the lease was soon to expire, he took a page from the same Book of Miscalculations that seemed required reading for most owners of New York City real estate (see Cucaracha Theater, Chapter One): He mistook fame for fortune and upped the rent another one-hundred dollars a month.

Ellen was still financing La MaMa virtually alone, with everything she earned—the membership fees hardly paid lighting and upkeep—and realized something drastic had to be done. Again, with little warning, she moved operations temporarily to a cramped space at 9 St. Marks's Place, and began scouting for another "permanent" theater space. It sounded ridiculous, she knew, but if she only had a building of her own...she dreamed as she walked the streets. The more she thought about it, the less impossible the dream seemed (they didn't call her Earth MaMa, Earth Mover for nothing!). If she could just find the right place, she was convinced she could get funding to buy it. Somehow. She was again a woman possessed. The search—all over

the East Village—took months. It ended at 74 East Fourth Street in front of a building that was everybody else's idea of a monstrosity. But she, naturally, fell in love with it on sight, and vowed it'd be her theater. Her own words told it all, "I was shown a building. I only looked at it from the outside, but I decided I would take it, mainly because it's very baroque, which I love. At the top of it are baroque hearts, carved out all across the front; and to make it completely right, the same hearts were at the bottom of the building, only upside down. Also, on the top of the building there was a bust of Mozart, along with two other unidentified people.

"I asked a friend of mine to look up the history of the building. I found out that (it) was incorporated in 1863 by a certain 'Aschenbroedel Verein', a sort of German club for the furtherance of art, culture, and science. By the way 'Aschenbroedel' is German for Cinderella."

The wandering mama had her home. Now how was she going to pay for it? Ellen learned that the two largest foundations in America—Ford and Rockefeller—had offices in New York. She called them both by phone. To her utter surprise and delight, the former said it knew about La MaMa and was interested in helping her. How about an immediate purchase grant of twenty-five-thousand dollars? She was overwhelmed. In time, the Rockefeller Foundation came across with its own gift—but with stipulations: of the sixty-five-thousand dollars it planned to give her, fifteen-thousand dollars was to go toward the property purchase, and fifty-thousand dollars to the La MaMa Troupe, to be distributed among fifteen of its actors at fifty dollars a week each for six months out of the year, for two consecutive years. Instant happiness? Instant road block!

Actors Equity, patrolling hawk-like about the theatrical firmament, got wind of the Rockefeller arrangement and swooped down with another forbidding directive. La MaMa could not be subsidized like that. The money had to be paid to all actors who performed on its stages. Ellen adamantly refused. Equity insisted. She continued to refuse. There was a stand-off. Then Equity carved its final ruling in stone, once and for all: every actor would have to be paid for every appearance henceforth or La MaMa would be forced to cease operations. Period. The last thing on earth Stewart wanted was no La MaMa. She gave in and, to her credit, honored the edict faithfully ever after without a whimper.

The Cinderella building was more bastard than baroque. But there was no denying it was unique. Four stories high, of brick and stone, it flaunted a different lintel design atop each set of windows above the first floor. Mozart, worn as old soap, looked balefully from the arched niche over the large central one on the second floor, flanked by even murkier busts over narrow adjoining windows to each side (some wag guessed they were Beethoven and Liszt melting in the New York heat). What Ellen first took for heart shapes decorating the cornice and upper sides of the windows were actually stylized shields with faint traces of heraldic markings. But never mind. They were hearts to her romantic eye, and made a better story.

One had to back across the street to see the most interesting feature of all. Beyond the prominent cornice with its scallop shell end motifs, were two pointed protrusions that rose from the flat roof triangularly toward each other, stopping short of dosing into a pediment. They looked for all the world like tips of folded wings belonging to some guardian angel crouching within.

The street floor should have been an extravagant furbelow to Cinderella's upper finery, but it had long ago been converted to a disappointing store front. The only vestiges of former grandeur were four stone columns carved with Ellen's upside down hearts pointing back up to what might have been. When the building was renovated, at a cost of well over one hundred-thousand dollars, the irregular spaces between them were solidly bricked in, leaving an opening just big enough for a pair of rectangular double doors with speakeasy windows and a minuscule La MaMa sign above. This no-nonsense nod to functional modern was best experienced close up where it formed an unobtrusive background for the crowds that were kept at bay outside before performances. But from a distance it was obvious, as any architectural student could see, the designer had created an unharmonious facade that thumbed its nose at the building's past and amusing pretensions.

By the end of September 1968, the money had been raised, and the remodeling begun. The ground floor was to house the lobby and the larger of two theaters. Over the lobby on the second floor was a small office

for Ellen and her staff (under Mozart) that backed up to the lighting booth and upper tiers of the downstairs theater. The second performing space piggy-backed the first on the third floor and was also designed to seat one hundred. The narrow, winding stairway that connected them trudged on to the top floor that was originally conceived as a temporary rehearsal room and eventual huge poetry reading center, but ended up as Ellen's living quarters, with about the same degree of privacy her other domicile afforded. The playwrights simply transferred their butts and affections from the big round table on the Fifth Street to the big round table in the Fourth Street aerie; she was still the old lady who lived in a shoe, but the shoe had stretched and was bursting its stitches.

In the midst of all the hubbub, Ellen became seriously ill and had to be hospitalized for months. The old year turned into the new before she was released. When she returned, she found to her dismay that the new building was not even close to being completed, and the Foundation money had long since been spent. Everywhere in the neighborhood, actors were rehearsing plays scheduled to be done there, but the contractors balked at rushing the project. Even more disturbing was the fact that, while she was in the hospital, members of the La MaMa Troupe had fallen to bickering and squabbling amongst themselves and their work was being affected. Actress/playwright Julie Bovasso, whose play GLORIA AND ESPERANZA was slated to open the upstairs theater within a few days, moaned, "We can take anything...no food, very little sleep and poor rehearsal conditions, but we need to know *she's* around." Rochelle Owens, whose duet of one-acts, HOMO and THE QUEEN OF GREECE, had originally been slated to open the upstairs theater, echoed the sentiment, admitting that Ellen was "the love energy of La MaMa."

Stewart called an immediate impromptu meeting at the dingy little coffee shop down the street that had become their gathering place while the theater was under construction. She soothed hurt feelings and flagging egos and put everybody back on working schedules to fit the most rehearsals possible into the limited time left.

"La MaMa will open Wednesday even if the walls aren't painted (most of them had been stripped back to predictable basic brick) and there's dust on the floors," she vowed, and then gave out the good news that La MaMa had won the prestigious Margo Jones Award of one-thousand dollars, solving the problem of how to pay for the new lighting equipment that was just then being installed. She kept the bad news to herself—that she might have to return to the hospital soon.

Tom Eyen and Ed Satrakian were there, and she discussed the details of Tom's new musical CAUTION: A LOVE STORY ABOUT A CERTAIN DUKE AND DUCHESS (The Windsors, of course), that was to inaugurate the downstairs theater on April 2, under Ed's direction. It was by now something of a tradition: an Eyen play had opened every new La MaMa space so far, and he was becoming known as the Neil Simon of Off Off Broadway with, at one time, four plays running simultaneously. "I'm very prolific," he explained offhandedly. And lucky. From the early 1960s to the late 1970s, more than thirty-five of his experimental plays were produced—mostly at La MaMa. But he got his start at Caffé Cino, where his WHY HANNAH'S SKIRT WON'T STAY DOWN was the first play I saw there and never forgot. Like all his early plays, it was an outrageous satire on current sexual mores and hangups, with campy lines full of filthy language. I, like so many others, took to his work immediately, and we formed a ragged cult that enjoyed spotting each other at all of his latest productions; we all agreed that the best ones were those performed by his own company, The Theater of the Eye, formed with a Rockefeller grant in the mid 1960s. It was a loose collaboration of actors who remained with him for a decade, performing such works as SARAH B. DIVINE at Spoleto (1967), which he directed himself. Others included THE WHITE WHORE AND THE BIT PLAYER (1964), GIVE MY REGARDS TO OFF OFF BROADWAY (1966), WHO KILLED MY BALD SISTER SOPHIE? (1968), WOMEN BEHIND BARS (1974), and THE NEON WOMAN (1979). The production that brought him his first commercial success, however, was THE DIRTIEST SHOW IN TOWN (1970), a raunchy spoof on the sex-oriented plays of the era, notably OH! CALCUTTA!, with their, by then, obligatory nudity. His characters, however, in try-

ing to represent all forms of explicit sex on stage in as lurid a manner as possible, always ended up failing in their attempts. One thing after another went hilariously wrong. Facetiously billed as a treatise on the effect of pollution, it was left to the audiences' imaginations what kind of pollution he had in mind. The play ran for two sold-out seasons at the Astor Place Theater, across the street and four steps down from Joe Papp's Public Theater.

Born in Cambridge, Ohio, in 1940, Tom Eyen was the youngest of six children. I asked him once, when I ran into him on the street near my home, why it was that every time I went outdoors it seemed I saw him cruising the neighborhood with that supercilious grin on his face. He replied, without missing a beat, that he seldom ever went out; it must have been his identical twin brother, who was a notorious street person and spent all his time roaming the Village looking for interesting plots for his brother's plays. The grin, he explained, well, that was probably from recalling very satisfying previous bowel movements, which were numerous and memorable. His twin was not very bright, he concluded, and probably had nothing else to think about. After graduating from Ohio State University, he left immediately for New York and studied acting, which he soon realized he was not cut out for. He went to work as a press agent for awhile and then turned to playwriting.

During the mid 1970s, he conceived the idea for a blockbuster musical based on the careers of the singing group the Supremes, with Diana Ross. Entitled DREAMGIRLS, it was first tried out in three workshops that he led, and it was during those he discovered and cast Jennifer Holliday in the lead role, before handing over the directorship to Michael Bennett, who saw it to Broadway.

DREAMGIRLS was an overnight success in 1981 and ran for one-thousand-five-hundred-twenty-two performances, earning Eyen a Tony Award for Best Book for a Musical. He and his collaborator, Henry Krieger, were nominated for Best Lyrics and Score, and with the record producer David Foster they shared a Grammy for Best Cast Album.

In 1976, Tom Eyen became a staff writer for Norman Lear's famous lampoon television soap opera, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, and he was again able to employ his old satirical Off Off Broadway humor in holding the country's artificial values up to ridicule by exploiting them. The same year he wrote material for Bette Midler's first network television special, "Ol' Red Head is Back," for which he was nominated for an Emmy. With that show his professional career, and hers, seemed to have come full circle: Midler had made her New York theatrical debut in his musical play MISS NEFERTITI REGRETS back in 1965 (after her notorious gig as chanteuse-y in a gay men's bath house wrapped in a towel).

He became rich from his hits, but it was ironical that he didn't gain recognition or success until he went commercial—just the route he constantly derided in his plays. His saving grace was a detached, self-deprecating humor that kept him sane while he reveled in the madness of celebrity.

Another bit of irony he would probably have appreciated was that his death in June 1991 by cardiac arrest in his home in Palm Beach, Florida, was followed only a few months later by that of his one-time friend and fellow playwright with whom he shared the honor of opening the new La MaMa theaters in 1969, Julie Bovasso. She died in New York of cancer at sixty-two, still struggling with the muse on the Lower East Side.

Her play, GLORIA AND ESPERANZA, was moved to the ANTA Theater on West Fifty-second Street in February 1970 and was hailed at the time as a good choice to introduce La MaMa to Broadway. Clive Barnes, the critic at the *New York Times* then, wrote, "It represented La MaMa at its most adventurous and at its most indulgent, and these are two of its most characteristic and likable qualities." Ellen Stewart repeated her nightly downtown ritual by walking out onto the stage for a preliminary greeting to the audience.

Bovasso starred herself and Kevin O'Connor in leading roles, both of them making their Broadway debuts also. (Irony of ironies, O'Connor's death from coronary occurred between those of Bovasso and Eyen in 1991.) Although the play was incapable of rational description, it was based loosely on a Candide-like poet, Julius Esperanza (O'Connor), who, on his trek to maturity, learns to come to terms with his own dark inner

self. But even that description makes it seem like heavy going. It was anything but. Bovasso was basically a boffo comic writer, albeit with serious intent, and her actors knew that the only way to get her point across was to play it in broad slapstick. Nothing about the play was done by halves—the writing, acting, or her own directing. It began and ended with circus music and a parade down the aisle, and music continued to punctuate the rest of the work: old music mostly, to go with the old movies that were flashed on the backdrop and old style dances employed throughout. Barnes continued, “Miss Bovasso likes everything old. She treasures trifles and makes them treasures.”

She threw in all kinds of stereotypical characters to amuse the audience with most of actors doubling in roles: a midget psychiatrist who was only slightly saner than his mad patient, an Internal Revenue agent turned film producer with a built-in whip, a wicked homosexual Oriental landlord, and a devil-like nemesis named Jack Sinistre (wonderfully played by Alex Beall) who invariably dashed all Esperanza’s hopes. Bovasso was the poet’s girlfriend and also an aging movie star named Gloria B. Gilbert, whose every line was edged in sentimental cynicism. Essentially the play was a burlesque show performed by grotesques in high camp (except for O’Connor, who played his role very straight and serious, which made it all the more funny).

Julie Bovasso was, herself, capable of overplaying lines even in her private life. At once comical, maddening, outrageous, and bad-tempered, she was a complex person who most of us, I’m afraid, misunderstood. She developed a terrible reputation for disrupting and ruining productions she was connected with if they didn’t suit her, or if she didn’t like one of those involved. She could be merciless. Many actors had Bovasso stories that, collected together, made her appear downright manic. An example was when her play, ANGELO’S WEDDING, was being presented at Circle Repertory Theater in 1985. Relations between her, the director, and some cast members became so strained that they ended up in a vicious altercation during a performance. The company’s artistic director, Marshall W. Mason, called an intern and the house manager to evict her bodily from the theater. But she returned somehow, and at the beginning of the third act, ran onstage again and screamed at the audience to go home. A more recent incident was during the 1990 Obie Awards Ceremony, when she sat with a coterie of friends at a very strategic table up front and verbally harassed the master of ceremonies, Dustin Hoffman, the entire evening. (To his credit, Hoffman took it all very well, and never lost his cool). That time she wasn’t evicted, but created such bad vibes all around her, with people shouting “Shut up! Go home!”, that many wished she had never attended.

She was credited as introducing works of the Theater of the Absurd to New York—with plays by Genet, Ionesco, and de Ghelderode—at her own experimental Tempo Playhouse on St. Mark’s Place in the mid 1950s. In the premiere of Genet’s THE MAIDS, she won an Obie for Best Actress in 1956. In 1972, Julie Bovasso also won Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards for Best Actress in THE SCREENS, also by Genet.

Describing that afternoon outside the coffee shop after the reunion-meeting, reporter Bosworth caught the flavor of the moment: the group, which, besides Stewart, included Eyen and Bovasso, stood talking on the sidewalk. Suddenly, actors, playwrights, and directors seemed to converge from around every corner, hugging and kissing Ellen, and welcoming her back from the hospital. Among them was Jules Weiss, a fiftyish executive type with artistic tendencies, who had doubled as La MaMa’s unpaid business manager since 1966. While Ellen was indisposed, it was he who was at the site each morning to check on every minute detail of the renovation project.

“‘Good thing I did,’ he muttered, ‘I keep telling her she must be more aware of the financial problems here, of the complex logistics of running such a place. The problems—incredible!’

“Miss Stewart plucked at his sleeve. ‘What you sayin’, darlin’?’

“‘Nothing,’ he replied. He gave her a hard, searching look. ‘How are you feeling?’ he asked concernedly.

“Miss Stewart threw her head back and laughed. Then she caught hands with two of her playwrights (Eyen and Bovasso) and danced a little jig. ‘Mother is *fine*! Can’t you see? Mother is *always* fine.’”

If the early phase of work at La MaMa centered on productions of plays by fledgling writers such as Leonard Melfi, Paul Foster, Lanford Wilson, Megan Terry, Tom Eyen, Sam Shepard, Israel Horowitz and Jean-Claude van Itallie, then the second phase might be called the “O’Horgan/La MaMa” stylistic era with its international appeal, resulting in productions that elevated the director to “auteur” status, such as Rochelle Owens’ FUTZ and Foster’s TOM PAINE, and, by extension, HAIR.

After 1970, however emphasis was placed strongly on the work of resident troupes. La MaMa Plexus was the only one of the original three to survive intact, and under the direction of Joel Zwick, continued to train performers in a highly physical approach to acting. Then came the ETC Company under the artistic leadership of Wilford Leach, and the Repertory Troupe, directed by Andrei Serban. The ETC Company specialized in work making innovative use of movement, music, film and other theatrical elements, along with drama. The repertory Troupe was formed to allow Serban, a recently transposed Rumanian-born director, well-versed in the classical repertoire, to develop a small group of actors into versatile performers of many acting styles, so that they would be readily able to cope with the works of some of the new young writers Stewart felt were turning more and more to classic structure, if not content. Then there was the GPA Nucleus, a primarily black company for studying and presenting work based on African ethnic and historical themes. In the same vein were an Asian-American company and a Latin bilingual troupe. Mabou Mines was a resident company at La MaMa in the early 1970s, and it was there they explored the possibilities of performer-produced music and uses of new technology, along with mime, that became important elements of their highly experimental performances when they later branched out on their own.

This third phase also saw the expansion of La MaMa itself. Besides the two theater spaces in the original building at 74-A East Fourth Street, a much larger performing area was added that allowed for more expansive productions as well. Called the Annex, it was a former film studio on the second floor of a building several doors west of La MaMa, with a large waiting area (a godsend for theater regulars who dreaded being kept out in the cold until the actors were ready at the old place), and a tremendous high-ceilinged room capable of holding larger audiences as well as casts and sets.

If Tom O’Horgan represented the apogee of La MaMa of the 1960s, surely Andrei Serban was the prime flag-bearer of the 1970s. Ellen had discovered him on one of her many European expeditions and brought him back alive to direct two classical plays for the Repertory Troupe to practice on: UBU PERE and a sixteenth century mystery play, ARDEN OF FAVERSHAM. But most theater lovers first became aware of him when they saw the two works that became, for many, the artistic centerpieces of the decade Off Off Broadway. The one was his searing adaptation, FRAGMENTS OF A TRILOGY, based on the Greek classics MEDEA, TROJAN WOMEN, AND ELECTRA, and the other, Bertolt Brecht’s THE GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN, in 1975-1976. For the first, he utilized every inch of the Annex as a performing area. He even eliminated seats, so the audience spent the entire evening milling about from one center of activity to another, totally integrated with the action of the performances. In the latter, the same vast expanse was divided up inventively by revolving screens designed by Jun Maeda, proving the oriental maxim that a space divided into many smaller spaces seems much larger than it was originally. The music for both productions was composed by Elizabeth Swados, and the Brecht piece used a new English version by Eric Bentley. Each production was billed as a work in progress (meaning “unfinished”) but, even though later revivals were altered slightly, what the audience saw was as close to finished pieces as experimental theater got.

There were three reprieves of FRAGMENTS: in 1978, 1979, and the last in 1986, which was also Serban’s final work at La MaMa for the decade. THE GOOD WOMAN was performed again in May 1978. Joe Papp lured him away to the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center for Chekhov’s THE CHERRY ORCHARD (can anyone forget that incredible set with a background of many real trees?), and Aeschylus’ AGAMEMNON. The performances were almost always sold out for both productions, and it seemed for a time that ritualistic theater was making a resounding comeback in New York. THE CHERRY ORCHARD had an

excellent new adaptation written by Jean-Claude van Itallie, and it also proved to be an acting landmark for the remarkably versatile actress Irene Worth.

Serban followed the spring 1979 revivals at La MaMa with a try at Off Broadway musical theater, this one *THE UMBRELLAS OF CHERBOURG*, a Sheldon Harnick adaptation of the popular French film, again under Joseph Papp's aegis. His only other work for La MaMa was a 1980 stab at Shakespeare—*AS YOU LIKE IT*—with a score again by Elizabeth Swados, and the 1983 production of Chekhov's *UNCLE VANYA* with a superb set designed by Santo Loquasto and built by Jun Maeda, and lighting design by Jennifer Tipton. It boasted an excellent cast that included F. Murray Abraham, James Cahill, Joseph Chaikin, his sister, Shami Chaikin, and Frances Conroy.

Another building was added to the growing La MaMa compound, this one a block south on Great Jones Street, that housed rehearsal lofts and, eventually, a ground floor Galleria for displaying new works of art of young painters and sculptors that was a separate but equal entity, watched over with the same maternal zeal by Mama Stewart. There was an interesting little sidelight that touched both on Serban and that building. In spring, 1985, I was standing one morning on Fourth Street not far from the original La MaMa "baroque," talking with Matthew Maguire, a Stewart favorite and the director of his own troupe *CREATION* (more about which in a later chapter). Ellen and her entourage left La MaMa and walked towards us. When they came abreast, she slipped between us and took one of our hands in each of hers, saying coyly, "Come wis me. Now." And she led us around the block to the rehearsal building, insisting that we tell no one about what we were about to witness. Intrigued, Matthew and I followed her down the flight of steps to the basement, which had a central open area rimmed like a pie crust with crimped-back folding chairs. She indicated the ones she wanted us to take and told us to sit quietly and wait, then disappeared.

Realizing we were the only spectators on hand, we exchanged puzzled looks, shrugged, and did her bidding. Nearby a small band of musicians was in place, switching on tiny lamps over the music stands. They listened intently to sotto voce instructions from the music director, who was none other than Elizabeth Swados.

At a thump on the floor above, Swados began the music—eerie, other-worldly stuff—and a long train of performers descended the stairs single file and filled up the performing space. They were in weird textured costumes made of rope, burlap, feathers, and what looked like animal bones. Matthew and I had been given no prior explanation or programs, so his guess was as good as mine about what was going on. I figured it to be some kind of tribal rites, or, maybe, a new Serban work going through first dress rehearsal. The participants moved about in what were obviously choreographed patterns, and some of them emerged from the grunts and wails that accompanied the movements with what could be called singing recitatives. As the work progressed and a story-line began to unfold, we both realized we were seeing an interpretation of the Oedipal myth set to music very much like Andrei Serban would have conceived it. The cast, some moving more awkwardly and self-consciously than others, seemed to be from every racial background (with black predominant) and in increasing degrees of nudity, proportionate to the importance of their roles (Oedipus wore a bikini loin cloth and cape of fake fur). We watched the proceedings for what seemed hours until, abruptly, a voice from behind the musicians shouted, "Cut. Cut. That's it for now." It was Ellen Stewart. The young performers left the room the way they entered, and she approached us, smiling broadly. Did we like it? Was it exciting?

Yes, we blurted, but what *was* it?

"Surprise," she answered and said we could leave now. The next rehearsal wouldn't be until the afternoon. Back out on the street, we took leave of each other with shakes of our heads and hands palm-out. It wasn't until the next year, when word was out that there was going to be a performance of a new work written and directed by Ellen Stewart herself, that it became clear what we had been a party to: it was her first attempt at making theater instead of making it *possible*! And, apart from being carbon-copy Serban, it was well-thought out and executed. All it really needed was a tighter focus and a good editing job.

How it all came about was, after one of her numerous trips abroad, she had been asked by the Greek govern-

ment to create a work based on local mythological legend to be presented at the European Cultural Center of Delphi. It was a proposal she couldn't refuse. She thought about it, and then started researching Greek myths. The result was MYTHOS OEDIPUS, a dance opera, for which she wrote the text and directed the overall production. Swados wrote the music for the Chorus, while individual members of the ensemble, made up mostly of the Great Jones Repertory Company Stewart had recently formed and guest artists from around the world, composed and choreographed solo passages. In all, there were representatives from Greece, Israel, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Turkey, and the Americas.

Performing in the ancient amphitheater must have given them the thrill of their young lives. I recalled my first visit there and the awe it inspired—far up Mount Parnassus, the favorite habitat of the Muses and the supposed center of musical and poetic inspiration, above Delphi, the legendary oracle of the god Apollo situated at its base—facing out on the vast, panoramic sweep of the sea and harbor over forests of two-toned olive trees: trees that, when evening breezes tickled their pale underleaves, sent showers of silver coins down the valley. It was a rewarding climax to a difficult ascent on foot past a doorless Treasury that no longer held money, around a venerated hole through which no oracle had any further words of wisdom to impart, and across a Stadium where the only naked bodies competing at games were clumps of muscular clouds hurdling the rim at sunset. There in the amphitheater, one shared the rush that bygone climbers must have felt as they scampered to their places in the tiered bowl to witness the magical blend of speech, movement, and spectacular setting that made up Greek drama.

The combination certainly seemed to have worked for Ellen and her company; she was so pleased with the production that she mounted it at La MaMa when they returned, and it was given reprieves in 1988 and 1989, preceded by another of her dips into the classics, ORFEI, a work she had developed at the East First Street Music Workshop in 1986. (She was also to try her hand at a very different kind of entertainment when she wrote and directed the COTTON CLUB GALA in 1985.) The second time around, MYTHOS OEDIPUS was accompanied by yet another ambitious effort from her extensive research: a dance opera entitled DIONYSUS FILIUS DEI that featured the experimental theater world's best known crossdresser with the soprano range of an Yma Sumac, John Kelly (more of him later). Following that was a dance epic in five parts, ANOTHER PHAEDRA VIA HERCULES, with the Great Jones Company, augmented by new members from Estonia and China. To show the scope of Ellen Stewart's world-wide activities, she began this work as a project in Buenos Aires and continued it in Milan. (For those unlucky enough to have missed any of the above on an earlier round, the entire series was reprised in 1989.)

The 1980s ushered in another phase in La MaMa's evolvment. The recent phenomenon called "Performance Art" was gaining in popularity quickly. It started out as a device for visual artists to expand their scope into the fourth dimension—acting out subjects instead of merely painting or sculpting them, using words in place of pigments. Among the earliest practitioners of performance art was an eccentric English duo known only by their first names—Gilbert and George. They began painting portraits of each other in the 1960s, dressed in identical three-button suits and ties, then appeared personally in galleries dressed in similar clothes and acted out scenes from their private lives (life, really—for they lived together, slept together, ate together, and painted together on the same canvases as one person), using spoken words and minimal movement as an extension of painting. In 1971, they opened the Sonnabend Gallery in Soho by performing, over and over, a robotic dance to the music of "Underneath the Arches"—a ballad about homelessness. (Twenty years later they returned to repeat it. In a tribute to the event, Carter Ratcliff and Robert Rosenblum wrote "Gilbert and George: The Singing Sculpture," published by Anthony McCall. Mr. Ratcliff summarized their style: "Gilbert and George did not so much converse as offer rigid, impersonal, thus monumental, representations of what proper conversation should be.")

But before long, young actor/writers jumped on what started out as an artist/sculptor bandwagon, and turned it into an updated version of the old stand-up nightclub act. The first examples were little more than

variations of what-I-did-last-summer. Then they became increasingly more sophisticated and involved, until a point was reached where only a fine line separated performance art from performing art; Performance Art developed into a bona fide theater medium. This new form of entertainment seemed to require more intimate settings than, say, the wide open spaces of La MaMa Annex, to be effective. So lofts and dance centers were becoming booked solid for performances. Following the trend, Ellen converted the upstairs theater at 74A East 4th Street into The Club, a pseudo-cabaret setting replete with all the drawbacks and amenities of the real thing—patrons crowded against each other at minuscule tables; too few waiters dispensing too little beer; terrible sight lines; bad air; but a steamy hothouse homogeneity that created the right mood for the kinds of work presented.

The young artist who, for me, best exemplified La MaMa's 1980s phase was John Jesurun, a sculptor with unique vision, who converted whatever spaces he occupied into personal statements. His was such an extraordinary talent that his life and work will be examined in depth in a later segment of this book. It should be mentioned here, however, that he, unlike many of his predecessors and contemporaries, was to create drama and movement out of spoken words alone, with only minimal physical action on stage.

The greatest single kick in my own twenty-five year "theatrical" career was knowing La MaMa's phenomenal founder. She left her indelible (purple-inked) imprint on whatever she touched—including hearts. No one who met her ever forgot her. I even recalled vividly our first meeting: the place, the month, the year, the weather, and the circumstances (and so did she. She told me!)

Spring arrived late to Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village that year of 1969: March winds arrived in April; April showers came in May and turned the two intersecting streets that defined the southeast corner of the Hotel Earle into Venetian canals, and the sidewalks into slippery quays. The Earle had definitely seen better days, and would again; two brothers had recently bought it and were attempting renovation into a passable tourist retreat, though it would take the better part of twenty years at their pace of one or two rooms at a time. (When it was completed in 1990, a fancy half-round glass and wrought-iron diadem haloed the entrance lettered "Washington Square Hotel"; by then all traces of the old Earle, as we knew it, were obliterated.) In the 1960s, it housed a mixed bag of tenants: some transients, some regulars, some welfare families. There were no kitchen facilities, so everybody improvised. The window ledges were cold-weather refrigerators as well as anchors for lengths of electric cord that looped from one to the other for clothes lines; the windows were disposal bins through which all manner of debris filtered out and down.

Endemic to that kind of establishment was a thriving hooker-and-john trade that was carried on in the rooms the ladies rented as "service centers." But, although they sometimes lingered on the corner chatting with each other and neighbors while awaiting cabs to take them to the uptown clubs they worked, little actual soliciting went on out front. That was a relief to Mildred Milch and me; she owned and ran the Waverly Gallery there on the corner, four steps down in the hotel's sub-basement, and I helped manage it occasionally. The new owners had given her a generous long-term lease at a modest yearly increase with the understanding that she keep a classy-looking establishment to help bolster the new image they were trying to create. Hookers drumming up trade right outside the main windows would have made it impossible.

The two windows reached from pavement level to stroller's mid-chests, so, once seated inside, the scene was viewed from worm's eye perspective; but on the sidewalk, all of the gallery's interior could be taken in at a glance. It consisted of two smallish rooms connected by a narrow hallway that gave off onto a storage facility on one side and a laughably inadequate little step-up toilet with Iron Age accouterments on the other. Diagonally across the intersection was the west entrance to Washington Square Park that was, by then, the local drug dealers' paradise. Everything from 'ludes to poppers to pot and beyond was available there, mainly because the park served as the central campus for New York University—not that a goodly number of vehicles with Jersey plates didn't cruise the area in search of quick fixes; weekends they were lined up around the block. But most pushers would tell you their main trade was from undergraduates. The problem was that,

with a flourishing drug business in the immediate vicinity, there was a demand for a convenient dark private place for quick shoot-ups and snorts. So once it was learned there was a toilet just four steps down across the corner, a steady trickle of dubious art lovers began beating a path through the gallery to the facilities, leaving behind a toilet clogged with exotic wrappers and a floor dusted white with pungent powder. It got so bad that eventually the street door had to be kept bolted all the time, with access by buzzer and someone unlocking it by hand from inside. (That ended the drug traffic, but unfortunately kept out a number of genuinely interested but timid souls from venturing on down.)

I had been the gallery's artistic director for several years and occasionally sat in for Mildred when she had errands to run or wanted a brief respite. So it was on one of those soggy May afternoons, when I was about to plop down into the seat behind the desk after hanging a group show (including my own satirical compositions), that the buzzer sounded, shattering the muted monotony of rain against the windows and startling me into an about-face in mid-step. A sudden blast of wind sent a spray of water against the outside of the door, blurring the pane so it was impossible to make out anything of the caller beyond a dark cluster of squiggly streaks.

There were three sets of locks and chains to deal with, as elaborate as a guardsman's tunic. Mildred was partially handicapped from an early tennis accident that left one hip immobile and one leg increasingly shorter than the other, necessitating a cane when walking; and her theory was that if someone looked in and saw how vulnerable she was, the confusion of locks would allow her precious time to call 911 if a break-in seemed imminent. (It never dawned on her that if anyone was that intent on entering, the easiest thing to do would be bust the glass.) I was fumbling with the security chains, still squinting out, when a female voice said, "Hurry, dah-lin'." I slipped the last bolt and yanked the door open. There stood this striking black woman framed in rain; she smiled and tilted her head to one side coquettishly:

"May I come in? Please?"

I pulled the door wider and stepped behind it out of the spray.

"Duck weather," she said as she entered. It sounded like "Duck wezzzer." One graceful hand brushed off droplets from both shoulders, and she gathered the folds of the umbrella she carried point down. Duck wezzzer?

Who could this Afro-Ondine be? A new hooker on the block with no cab to jump into? It was hard to tell from her attire, which was carefully coordinated in earth tones to enhance her light caramel skin: nut brown slacks over high-heeled boots, a short tan raincoat, and an off-white sweater decorated with a long strand of amber beads that caught glints of the wide hand-wrought copper loops dangling from her ears. Could be any well-dressed woman, really, I thought, except for the wig; that was a give-away: ladies of the evening often wore outlandish fake hair as a badge of their profession, perhaps to enhance the comforting illusion that none of the naughty things they did were real either. Hers was as obvious as it could be—a matted beige mass that was strangely at odds with the rest of her.

"D-do you want to look around?" Close up, hookers made me nervous. "Please, feel free to browse."

The lovely hand caught my arm. "I already have seen your work, dah-lin'. I love it. But that's not why I'm here." There was a teasing flash in the big brown eyes. "I'm here for money, my dear. Pure and simple. Lots and lots of it, and I'm not going to leave until you promise to give it to me." Her accent was sort of French. Her teeth were perfect. What the hell did she want from me? I inched backward toward the desk.

"I don't know how I can help you," I said, uncomfortably huffy. "Just how much did you have in mind?"

"Oh, *thousands*, dah-lin'—as much as you can give me." Perfect smile. Perfect control. False eyelashes narrowed like Venus flytraps. Thousands? Yikes! I knew about high-priced call girls, but here in Washington Square, the home of give-it-away? Haight-Ashbury's bargain basement east? Some dame. Some accent. Some gimmick!

I was going to have to sit down, that much I knew. We eased into the two facing chairs that straddled the desk. The rain on the window beside me continued pelting the glass like BB shot. That's better, I decided; the desktop acted as a neutral buffer zone between me and that ever so faint whiff of—gardenia? My guest threw the raincoat back off her shoulders and drew a zippered portfolio from the pouch she'd let slide to the floor. Laying it flat on the desk, she slowly undid it all around as teasingly as a Gypsy Rose Lee strip, paused, flashed the smile again, and tilted her head.

"You still don't know who I am, do you, dah-lin?" I shook my head and stared down at the blank cover. Then she opened it to the first page. I read the name on the letterhead just as she spoke it aloud—"La MaMa."

"You see now? I am z' Ma-Ma from La Ma-Ma. Z' experimental theater."

"Oh, my God, of course," I struck my forehead. "Ellen Stewart, the lady with the cow bell!" The giggle bubbling up in my throat was tinged with hysteria, so relieved was I to find out who she was—and wasn't. Her name was familiar, of course—she was something of a legend even then—but I'd really only seen her from a distance at both Second Avenue venues and always attached to that cow bell. It was known that until recently she'd supported La MaMa entirely from her own earnings. But the vast new Fourth Street undertaking was another "pile of brecks" entirely. After only one month she'd already found the need for outside help or she'd be forced to sell the buildings and move operations to Europe. La MaMa had outgrown Ellie's Creations.

So here she was, out on the beat in person, talking up her "baby" to every foundation director who would let her in the door. (She was smart to do it all in person. Her letters were a mess: baroque curlicues with too many words that circumvented logic and never explained what she really had in mind. Vis-a-vis, however, she could turn over words and phrases with that soft whisper of an accent and make them sound not only coherent, but convincing.)

She successfully convinced me about supporting her baby ("Zis is it, dah-lin'; zis is *really* it.") during a half hour when the rain symphony subsided slowly with the storm clouds. By the time the sun was again shooting fiery arrows through the treetops, she had my commitment. As a bonus, she acquired another "biddie" for her "household"; I was ready to follow her anywhere. Leonard Melfi once said that when Ellen "adopted" you, she believed (with a few glaring exceptions) that you could do no wrong from then on, and everything would go well for you. Her magical pushcart was never too small to harbor one more dedicated postulant.

I figured, now we were "kin," I could confess my initial misgivings about her when she walked through the door. She laughed and said she had worked in the neighborhood for years and knew all about the Hotel Earle's reputation.

"Dah-lin," she cooed, "if that's who you thought I was, I'm flattered. Years ago, when I started my theater, I was accused of entertaining fifteen men in six hours. So it's nice to know someone thinks I look like I could still handle it. Thank you, my dah'lin'."

With a cheek peck, she waved bye and climbed the steps to the street, pausing momentarily under the rain-beads dripping off the overhang, I guessed to check if her imaginary pushcart awaited her at the curb. Then she (and it) skittered off across the upside-down reflections along Waverly Place.

The first production our Foundation helped sponsor was an embarrassment of riches called COCK STRONG, a madcap musical celebration of potency, with words by Tom Murrin and music by John Vaccaro and Ralph Czitron, that was presented at the new La MaMa Playhouse in June 1969. It was performed by the resident Playhouse of the Ridiculous accompanied instrumentally by a group calling themselves the Silver Apples, with Mr. Czitron on the guitar.

John Vaccaro was the founder and director of the Ridiculous, a loose amalgam of extrovert performers of varying degrees of talent (mostly awful), whose collective consuming passion was for getting into the most outrageous drag costumes imaginable—usually smothered under bushels of dripping sequins and fake jew-

els, and topped with whirlwind head-dresses of tulle and ostrich plumes—and then prancing about on equally outrageous elevated platform shoes à La Ziegfeld Follies in shameless displays of self-indulgence. Prancing was all that most of them did well. But Vaccaro's genius was being able to harness their flamboyant excesses into jubilant, often-hilarious living tableaux, coruscating around the stage like kaleidoscopic carousels in slo-mo. His was a company of clowns, whose credo might have been these words of Henry Miller:

Joy is like a river: it flows ceaselessly. It seems to me that this is the message which the clown is trying to convey to us, that we should participate through ceaseless flow and movement, that we should not stop to reflect, compare, analyze, possess, but flow on & through, endlessly, like music. This is the gift of surrender, and the clown makes it symbolically. It is for us to make it real

Vaccaro had become a master of the over-blown, overstated, too-much-is-never-enough school of staging that, like all good clown acts, was always tinged with vague whiffs of melancholy amid the colorful antics. Sometimes, in a later, much-admired piece titled *LA FIN DU CIRQUE* (1984), he was capable of creating the effect of a haunting high legato violin note sustained to a fine pianissimo that was heart-rending.

But most of his productions were blatant studies in boisterous, uninhibited, appalling bad taste. Vaccaro once admitted that he spent most of his adolescence in Ohio watching old Maria Montez movies (one regular performer in his company went by the name Mario Montez). He didn't know why; he was just addicted to them. He divulged as much at a memorial retrospective film tribute to his friend and collaborator, the cinematographer and flaming drag performance artist, Jack Smith, at the Millennium in the early 1990s. Smith had inspired the writer Susan Sontag to write her acclaimed essay "Notes on Camp," and, before his death from AIDS, had shared Vaccaro's proclivities, especially the Montez addiction. He designed some of the most lavish (and memorable) costumes for Vaccaro extravaganzas. John told of the time Smith once asked him where he got all the glitter stuff he used so lavishly, and he answered, "Here," pointing to the side pocket of his jacket. "I'm never without it." As a final touch to his tribute to Smith at the memorial, he reached down and drew out a cellophane packet of green sparkles, poured out a handful, and blew them into the air, whispering, "This one's for you, Jack." It was the kind of silly/sad touch that was typical of his style and endeared him to his devotees.

Vaccaro's head resembled a wary owl's, large, with eyes exaggerated by ever-present round dark-rimmed glasses; but his barrel-like torso gave him a slightly hunchbacked appearance, as if he were the elongated shadow of one of the dwarfs he often employed. The company was an eclectic mix of shapes, sizes, and ages. Some of the principals were allowed speaking lines that were usually delivered in falsetto screams; and it was generally acknowledged that, however a play was originally written, Vaccaro was expected to embellish and overlay it with so much embroidery of his own that the end result was like antimacassars on overstuffed Victorian chairs.

COCK STRONG was such a production: arranged in six tableaux and bookended with a prologue and epilogue, it contained seventeen songs (performed by a cast of seventeen) that, with the production numbers provided a momentum that was breathtaking and irresistible. John Vaccaro never forgot his friend Joe Cino's admonition to "Make magic!" Our foundation helped sponsor another silly offering of his in October, 1969, called *EYE ON NEW YORK (FOUR COMPOSERS)* by Tom Eyen, then redeemed itself by backing a revival of Adrienne Kennedy's *RAT'S MASS* and a new play by Sam Shepard, *UNSEEN HAND*, directed by Jeff Bleckner that December.

Over the years covered here, and beyond, we continued a close involvement with La MaMa and Ellen Stewart, even becoming privy to the most closely guarded secret in all theaterdom: her age. It was divulged in a moment of confidentiality by the Queen of Off Off Broadway herself, under penalty of banishment on disclosure. For the record, she was a full twenty years older than she looked—or seemed, which was ageless.

Chapter Seven

In C.I.R.C.L.E.S (And Out): 1970

Those satirical sculptures I was arranging in the Waverly Gallery when Ellen Stewart made her appearance that soggy afternoon in 1969 served as an entree to another exciting new theater group just taking its first baby steps across a loft on the upper West Side of Manhattan about the same time. The sculptures had become very popular in the few short years I had been turning them out, especially with people in the arts and show business: producer Robert Whitehead purchased one soon after Orson Bean did, as did another producer, Edgar Lansbury (Angela's brother). Lily Tomlin visited the gallery several times trying to decide which one to get for her then-hospitalized friend and director, Jane Wagner. Another Broadway producer, Jean Dalrymple, brought her friends to the openings. When they were shown regularly later at the Fairtree Gallery on Madison Avenue, John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono bought a life-sized ostrich I'd fashioned from two-by-fours and real black-and-white ostrich feathers that Arthur and I found in a feather merchant's establishment near Macy's, where we had to wait our turn while a pair of aging strippers got their boas re-constituted. A gallery spokesperson told me the Lennons wanted the sculpture to adorn the nursery of their yet-to-be-born first child, Sean; and it was the child's godfather, Andy Warhol, who had to clue them in to the fact that what they acquired was not a stork. (I often wondered if little Sean was told he was delivered by an ostrich!)

The sculptures, which I called Wood Larks because they were carved and cut from pieces of found lumber, encompassed all kinds of subject matter, viewed with a whimsical and sometimes devilish eye: there was the Spanish flamenco dancer with twelve legs in bright red shoes stomping in all directions from under a many-layered fishtail train; two lovers in a tight embrace kissing a two-sided mirror between them that reflected back only their own images; a bust of George Washington in a tricorn and high collar, had a round hole cut out of the back of his wig, showing a bedroom with a four poster where his brain would have been; there was a hefty black opera singer (Leontyne Price?) in a tight, hideously over-decorated sequined gown, splitting apart down the middle as she hits a high C. Others were almost three-dimensional comic strips, whose titles were as revealing as the works: a football huddle made from a round piece of plywood, held up with legs from old chairs and tables—and cut-off billiard balls stuck on top for helmets, with one raised higher than the others with a pair of eyes peering out from underneath, saying, "Any youse guys got an idea?" There was a haughty female kangaroo sitting erect with her lower torso made out of a chest of drawers, the top one of which was pulled out like a pouch so her baby with shiny black carpet tack eyes could watch the action; the hardware on the chest was of very ornate polished brass, and the title read, "I have always preferred Empire to Regency."

Andy Warhol's commercial agent was Fritzie Miller, who in turn was an old childhood friend of the Waverly Gallery owner Mildred Milch. So in no time, Fritzie began representing me also. She got Larks on covers of magazines and as adjuncts to Fifth Avenue store window displays, and eventually the U.S. Plywood Corporation gave me a retrospective exhibit in their vast street-level gallery on Third Avenue and Forty-fourth Street for a month. Fritzie, a character right out of Damon Runyan who could have been Carol Channing's mother, showed a portfolio of my work to a handsome young art director at J. Walter Thompson named Hollis Cheverie. He remembered seeing the U.S. Plywood show and even had the poster from it tacked up on his office wall. Through him, we embarked on a series of designs to be used in ads that were intended to lighten up the image of one of Wall Street's most staid denizens, the Irving Trust Company, and introduce its expanded world-wide operations. Each ad required a different sculpture and theme.

After each piece was completed, it was taken to a photography studio to be shot in an appropriate setting. The photographer was Al Francekevitch, whose sensitivity and considerate handling of the work won New York Illustrators Club awards for both of us, along with heavy trade press coverage. Al's assistant was a tall dark-haired young man named Alan Hertzberg, who was not only adept with a camera, but also showed

promise as a stage director for a small company that had recently formed on the Upper West Side. At some point in the shootings he got me to agree to attend a performance, within the next month, of *THE THREE SISTERS*—partly in traditional style, partly “updated.”

On the appointed evening, I found myself on the unfamiliar stretch of Broadway north of Seventy-second Street looking for number 2305. It wasn’t easy, because nothing above the street floor seemed to correspond to anything below, as if a century-old tintype, showing the tops of elegant old-world architectural structures, had had its lower portion covered by a Polaroid strip showing garish storefronts, none of whose entrances lined up with anything above. When I came upon number 2305, for instance, it was located next to a Thom McAn shoe store display window that seemed partly in another building, partly in the one I wanted. Overhead rose a handsome brick-and-stone pile with a central thrust balcony covered with an arch anchored by Ionic columns; a tiny bronze plaque by the door indicated Historic Landmark status.

Alan arrived presently and directed me up an ill-lit flight of stairs to the second floor, on the way giving a brief sketch of the loft’s past; it had once been a humble warehouse, then a men’s chapel, then (almost obligatorily) a porno film club hangout, and more recently a recording studio. The space was long and dark, ending at high french doors leading to the balcony. Its first troublesome feature was noticed immediately: an echo problem, as the sounds made by a group of young men setting up props at the opposite end bounced noisily off the pressed-tin ceiling and hurt our ears.

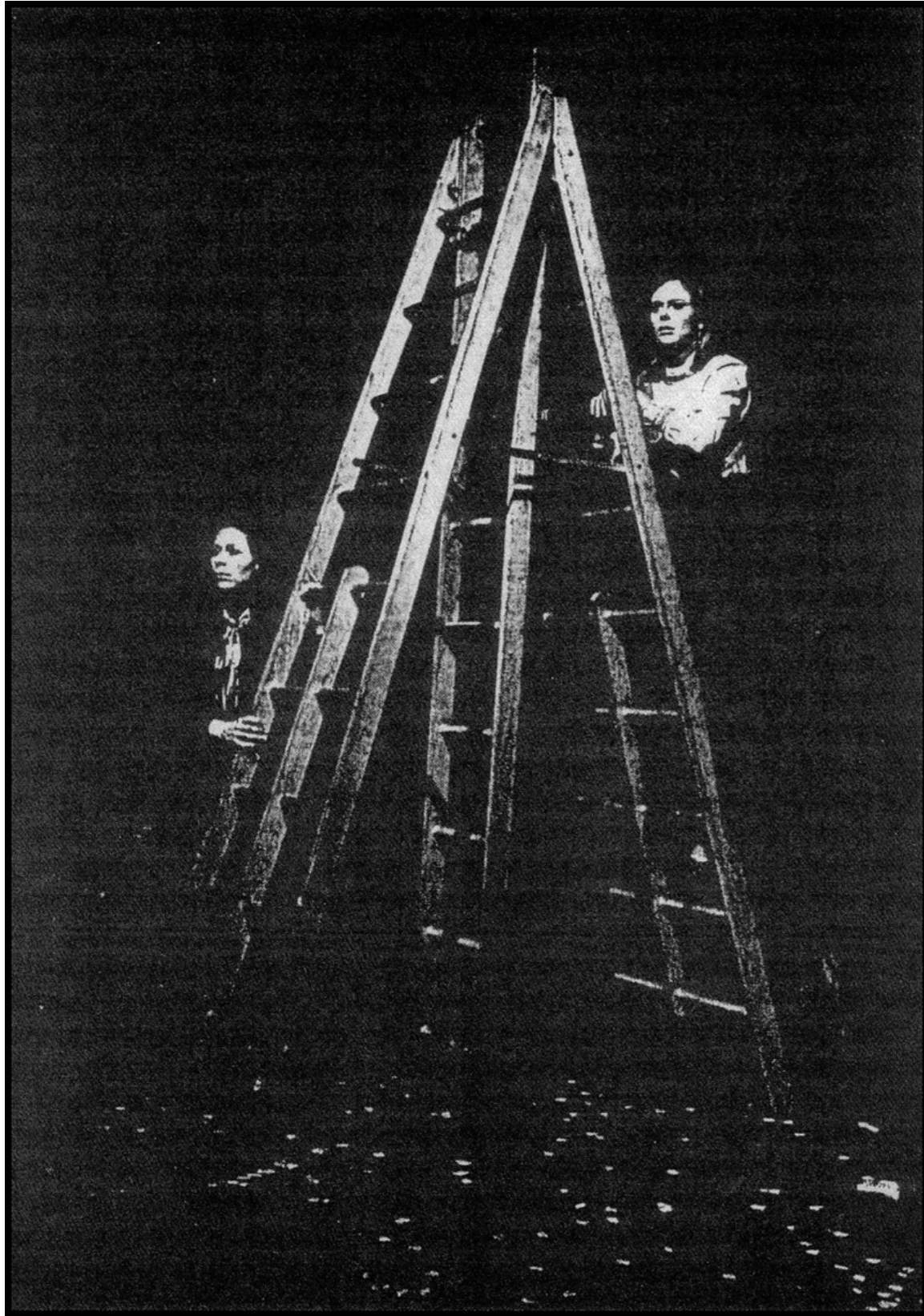
A narrow raised runway bisected the room lengthwise, from a diamond-shaped platform in front of the french doors to a proscenium-arched stage at the rear. Youthful spectators were already seated cross-legged on cushions along both sides, with a few overflowing onto the stuffed chairs of what looked like a conventional European living room set on stage draped with sheeting. Dominating everything, however, was a pair of high wooden A-frame ladders centrally located on the runway like giraffes, looking distinctly un-Chekhovian. This was where the part was to be played that Alan wanted me to see—the “experimental version”; the stodgy living room set was for the “traditional” rendition that was performed on alternate nights. We grabbed two pillows and plunked ourselves down near the runway.

The group performing the unusual double-bill called itself the Circle Repertory Company (which immediately brought to mind a confusing similarity with the Circle-In-The-Square name, and, as a matter of fact, would cause confusion later). Both versions were staged by its artistic director, Marshall W. Mason, with credit given to Rob Thirkield for developing much of the experimental version in his workshop classes the preceding fall using techniques from Grotowski, Barba, James Tuttle, and Blanche Evan. Marshall Mason was already known, from his Caffé Cino days, as a devoted traditionalist, but here was letting himself go in an all-stops-out contemporary approach.

As described in the program notes, the experimental *THE THREE SISTERS* was being done to show how Chekhov related to modern times, which, in 1970, were troubled ones indeed: only a month earlier, the killing of four Kent State University students by the National Guard had touched off spontaneous protests of youthful outrage all over the country, as had the recent gunning down of two black students by police in Mississippi; American troops were at that very date entering Cambodia, and a Greenwich Village townhouse next to where Dustin Hoffman lived was blown sky high in a series of accidental explosions set off in a basement Weatherman bomb arsenal. Everyone involved with the experimental *SISTERS* joined the huge March on Washington to stop the latest escalation of the Vietnamese War, not just as protesters, but also to research the activities. The program note continued, “the guideline for the experiment was the question; How would Chekhov make use of modern theatre techniques if he had written the play about our own revolutionary times?”

The production turned out to be a classic example of over-kill, but in its innocent exuberance, it worked. Alan Bunce of the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote in July 1970, “The company leaves no doubt about how *THE THREE SISTERS* is to be linked specifically to modern times. At the very start, the speech about the

father's passing is connected with John F. Kennedy's assassination. The "good days" under Czar Alexander II, fondly recalled, become the late president's administration. And in program notes the right-wing rule of Nicholas II is likened to today's political climate."



Chekhov's THE THREE SISTERS, 1969-1970
Circle Repertory Company
The sisters were:
Sharon Ann Madden, Beth Bowen, Marina Stefan

The Russian soldiers were loose-limbed tie-dyed hippies and Vershinin was played by the rock drummer, Joe Butler. The audience was mostly kids off the street (there being no admission charge), with a smattering of the usual avant-garde groupies who had managed to smell out the place in just the short time it existed. They all enjoyed it immensely; it was obviously speaking to them. To bits of rock music and vocals by Jimi

Hendrix and Paul Simon, Butler slunk down the runway, lit a joint, and passed it around to anyone who wanted a drag. The two ladders were used for climbing, draping, hanging on, and, in the last scene, a place where Masha and Vershinin take leave of each other. Hendrix's rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner" brought things to a close, the soldiers marching off to war with peace buttons on their chests.

It might not be pure Chekhov, I thought as I joined in the enthusiastic applause, but it was riveting theater and hit me where I lived. I don't know if the cast read my face as they beamed at us at curtain call that night, but they would soon celebrate their first private foundation grant.

Three close associates were responsible for forming Circle Rep, as it became known: Marshall W. Mason, Rob Thirkield, and Tanya Berezin. A fourth, the playwright Lanford Wilson, joined ranks several years later, and his work, more than any other's, came to be most closely associated with the company over the years. A 1978 still shot on the FIFTH OF JULY set showed Wilson and Berezin on a wicker love seat, with Mason and Thirkield standing behind, forming a square—seeming equal partners in its development and success. But any of the other three would admit freely that without Marshall Mason it would probably never have come into being. It was his firm vision of the kind of theater he wanted to produce that dominated and shaped every phase of the company's growth, from conception onward, and fired the others to want to be a part of it.



Cast of THE AMAZING ACTIVITY OF CHARLIE CONTRARE AND
THE 98TH STREET GANG, 1974
Circle Repertory (Rob Thirkield, Tanya Berezin, third and fourth from left)

Photo by Robert E Wasserman

Encountering Marshall Mason for the first time in 1969 was an experience in itself. He simply didn't look like anybody else. Gaunt as tall grass, he was a Daumier caricature of an impoverished nobleman. On first glance, his most striking feature was a lanky mass of light brown hair that hung down to the middle of his chest in front and fanned out across the backs of the skin-tight, long-sleeved shirts he fancied. It was so fine and shapeless that you could see daylight through it, and only accentuated his long bony face with its ever-present Mona Lisa smile—a distancing device behind which he was able to take in everything without divulging his own thoughts or opinions; he was the observer incarnate.

Those skinny shirts were usually open to nipple-level, revealing an occasional flash of medallion on a thick chain beneath, and so tight around his arms, an average thumb and forefinger could easily encircle the scrawny biceps they encased; a ubiquitous pair of black tube pants stuck to his legs, stopping far short of the ankles, which, in their usual white socks, acted as hyphens between them and pointed black half-boots that anchored the whole costume to the ground in splay-footed ambiguity. His hands—truly beautiful—were pale skeletal outbursts, often draped on his hips, one holding a king-size cigarette between long-nailed second and third fingers. When he spoke, his voice was unstartlingly soft, with still a faint trace of Texas he had tried for years to lose.

Was this, then, a man who could be taken seriously when he stood up and expounded reactionary theories before a group of potential followers, which he did at the very first meeting? Some didn't think so and left smirking. But enough remained to form the nucleus of a thirty-member company, and were told they would be put through a theatrical boot camp of workshops, classes, and on-stage training to make them worthy “receptacles” for the new-age drama he intended to produce. That meant returning to the classics, from which a truly American “realism” would eventually emerge, to counteract the European influences that currently dominated Off Off Broadway thinking—like Grotowski, Artaud, the Absurdist, Genet, Becket, and Ionesco, whom he frankly detested. Of current writers in favor with the theater intelligencia, Pinter was anathema to him, and Albee's work was simply grotesque. He looked for influence to Euripides, Shakespeare, Moliere, Chekhov, and Ibsen, who all wrote about the human condition instead of symbols. The contemporary playwrights he admired were Arthur Miller, Robert Anderson, William Gibson, and, above all, Tennessee Williams. (During the 1974-1975 season, he did Williams' *BATTLE OF ANGELS*, working directly with the author, and regarded the experience as a high point of his life and career.)

Marshall Mason was born in Amarillo, Texas, in 1940. When his parents divorced four years later, he went to live with the elderly man and wife who, as a young childless couple, had adopted his infant father and given him their name. These “grandparents” lived in Luling, south Texas, and, although the arrangement was meant to be temporary at first—until his mother, with her new husband, was settled in New Orleans and could send for him—it became permanent. His mother soon left that husband, moved back to San Antonio, and found another (she married six times before Marshall was in his mid-twenties). There was little room in her life for him except occasional visits, and so he lived out his adolescence partly in Amarillo, where his father, who never remarried, had returned, and in Luling, alternating a year in each place by the time he reached junior high school. He seemed content with the arrangement, but it allowed few lasting friendships or school ties. He did have one close friend who was, like him, nuts about movies, and they spent all the time they could afford in darkened film houses. Mason dreamed of being another Jimmy Dean or Marlon Brando, and of performing in the kinds of pictures they did. (Only vaguely aware of it at the time, he was already coming under the influence of Elia Kazan, who directed many of those films he admired, and who would later become his idol and model.)

So when he made the momentous decision to take up acting as a career, he yearned to be through with school, through with Amarillo, and embarked on it. Managing to graduate a year early, at seventeen, he bade good riddance to Texas—a place he never really liked, and would return to only for the funerals of his father and grandparents—and enrolled at Northwestern University in Chicago to study acting with the renowned

Alvina Krause, a traditional teacher who was considered an expert on Chekhov and Ibsen. He roomed with Rob Thirkield, a graduate student from Wesleyan who had spent two seasons at Krause's summer play-house, *Eagles Mere*, in Pennsylvania, and, like Mason, had entered Northwestern specifically to study with her. He was already enrolled when Mason arrived. They were unlike in many ways—Thirkield was of average build and full-faced, for one thing—except for their shared passion for acting and complete indifference to money: Mason because he never had had much, although he was well provided for by his doting grandparents; and Thirkield because he was rich enough to seldom have to give it a thought.

Rob Thirkield was from Brooklyn, New York, and an heir, through his mother, to the Ben Gay liniment fortune. His maternal grandfather had been a leader of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and he had many childhood remembrances of operatic recitals at the family estate in Glen Cove, Long Island, performed by leading singers and instrumentalists of the day. He had a sister six years his senior and a brother four years older, so, as a child, he spent much time alone—play-acting. He, too, wanted to be an actor from an early age, but was discreetly discouraged by his parents, who found his histrionics amusing as long as he didn't take them too seriously. Once they realized that he was in dead earnest, however, they didn't stand in his way, but never understood his choice. (When he wrote home that he was taking a theater architecture course at Northwestern, they said, "Ah, you could be an architect!" Acting was something you went to see others do, but not something you did yourself—at least not for a living.)

After the second year at Northwestern, Mason asked Alvina Krause to let him join her group of favorites at *Eagles Mere*. Her refusal was one of the most devastating and lasting blows to the young man's ego; it meant that she didn't consider him worthy of her patronage, that he had not impressed her as being a potentially great actor. It took much subtlety and gentle persuasion by one of her assistants to convince him that perhaps his talent lay more in the field of directing, and that he should continue studies with that in mind and not give up entirely and go into something else, like law, which he considered doing. The assistant, Professor Jim Gousseff, offered him a chance to try his directing hand in a production he had shown interest in, Williams' *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*, the next fall.

Mason thought it over, accepted the offer, and impressed the audiences—and more especially, Alvina Krause—so much that he won not only accolades and loud standing ovations for the production, but also Northwestern's 1959 Award for Best Director. He was nineteen. Krause invited him the next two years to *Eagles Mere* where he directed three productions, including Shaw's *THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA*, and he thereafter considered himself her protégé.

Marshall went to New York City after graduation in 1961, and Rob joined the army to serve two years after the Korean war. It wasn't long before Mason found the Caffé Cino and took advantage of the opportunity Joe Cino offered to direct whatever he wished there. He had kept himself alive by theater-related jobs such as stage managing (at the Phoenix Theatre), working box office (the Cherry Lane), and electrician's helper's tasks. He didn't like much of what he saw being done at the Caffé, so he directed only what he liked. When Thirkield returned from the service, Mason was already a name to contend with Off Off Broadway (though it wasn't called that yet). Other Northwestern friends had gravitated to New York also, especially Claris Nelson and Dennis Parichy. Nelson's *MEDEA* was one of Mason's more successful directing feats about that time, and on the strength of it, they decided to form a company they called Northwestern Productions. They rehearsed in the only places available then—Caffé Cino and La MaMa—and performed at the Actors Playhouse Off Broadway with several of Nelson's pieces and Ibsen's *LITTLE EYOLF*. They received mixed-to-bad notices (Walter Kerr's of *The New York Times* was especially devastating) and, after a subsequent unsuccessful stab at Shaw's *ARMS AND THE MAN*, the company disbanded.

Thirkield, though he had an affinity for the classics and enjoyed performing them with Mason, had a far deeper interest in the avant-garde movement. He worked closely with Tom O'Horgan at La MaMa, and was one of the members of the troupe that took London by storm on the 1967 tour. It was his influence that

moved Mason to expand his horizons beyond the strictly traditional, resulting eventually in the formation of one of the most artistically successful director/writer teams in modern theater, that of Marshall Mason and Lanford Wilson.

While Mason and Thirkield were involved elsewhere with Northwestern Productions, Wilson was coming into his own at the Cino. Mason and Wilson knew of each other's existence but so far had walked cautiously around each other without ever making overtures; Wilson may have been somewhat jealous of the attention the "Mason Crowd" was garnering at the Caff  just then. Although he fell in with everything going on at the time, he wasn't a part of any faction, and was actually rather reticent about pushing his work for fear of being rejected—something he knew a lot about.

Lanford Wilson hailed from the great Ozark region of southern Missouri. He was born in the small town of Lebanon in 1937 to very poor parents whose sad marital relations would lead to divorce by the time he was five. His father went to California, and his mother took the little boy to Springfield, Missouri, where, due to the World War II boom in local industry, she easily found work at a number of menial jobs to provide for the two of them.

When he was eleven years old, she remarried, this time to an uprooted Wisconsin dairy farmer who already had two daughters by a previous marriage. They all moved several miles south of Springfield to the tiny community of Ozark, and it was of Ozark that he wrote later in the Talley trilogy, even incorporating an old rundown mansion that sat high on a hill over the town as the "Talley house." Although there was some ambivalence about suddenly having a family thrust upon him (which he had desperately wished for) and at the same time losing first place in his mother's eye after so many years of being her sole interest, he loved the place he lived. He was popular at school, participated on the track team, and found he had a real talent and interest in art. Painting was also a way of relating to his absent father who, he was told, also had a lot of natural ability in that field (and whom he was not to see again for over a decade). He did a little acting in high school plays, but never harbored any secret desire to go into the theater, much less write for it.

Not knowing what he wanted to follow for a career, he entered Southwestern Missouri State College after graduating from high school in 1955, but, after one term, grew restless and decided to travel west. What he was really doing was looking for his father. He found him in San Diego, with a new wife and two boys. The reunion was a disaster—a meeting of two complete strangers. But his father got him work in a factory as a riveter, which he found endurable only because his free hours could be spent writing stories about the Ozarks. He enrolled in San Diego State College and found his colleagues there enjoyed his stories as much as his father scorned them. It was the beginning of his career as a playwright.

Fired by this new-found assurance, he registered for a playwrighting course at the University of Chicago. He learned what a standard play was and how to write it, but even then he had his own ideas about how it should be constructed. This was to be the only writing class he would ever take, even though he enjoyed it immensely—especially the times when the actors from the Goodman Theatre joined it to perform scenes the students had created. The important thing he had learned from this brief encounter was that he definitely wanted to be a writer, and he definitely wanted to write plays. The question was where and how? He left Chicago in 1962 and went directly to New York.

"The Big Apple" did not welcome him with open arms. It took months to find any kind of work, and even then he had to lie to get hired. He lived in flea bags on the upper West Side only to be able to save enough to see all the plays on Broadway. He was terribly disillusioned. Instead of seeing what he considered important work by America's best playwrights, there seemed only to be musicals: *BYE, BYE BIRDIE*; *GYPSY*; *MY FAIR LADY*; *WEST SIDE STORY*; and *THE MUSIC MAN*, some of which had been playing for years.

In time, he found the "Village" and Caff  Cino and became a regular. By now he was as much of a string-bean as Mason, with long hair, beak nose, and perpetual dark shadows under his eyes (he dressed more conventionally, however). If there was one feature that made him stand out it was an incredible set of eyebrows:

bushy, beautifully arched, and ending in “devil’s points” that lent a Montgomery Clift-like sensuality to his face. Where Mason was retiring and hesitant, Wilson was all bursts of energy and fast loud talk. He had great highs and deep lows. He was moody, opinionated, and his own severest critic.

Wilson’s first play to run at the Cino was a one-act comedy entitled *SO LONG AT THE FAIR* in 1963, and it was followed in rapid succession by *HOME FREE!*, a study of the forbidden subject of incest between a brother and sister, ending with her becoming pregnant, which was a big success; and *NO TRESPASSING*, another one-acter, that was a dismal flop. *HOME FREE!* moved to La MaMa for an extended run, and that was his first encounter with Ellen Stewart. Back at the Cino, a new piece, *THE MADNESS OF LADY BRIGHT*, about an aging homosexual’s remembrances, soon opened and became Joe Cino’s first major triumph. In all, in two runs, it chalked up an unprecedented 254 performances in a place where previously a one-week stand was phenomenal.

At a revival of *HOME FREE!* at the Cino in 1965, Wilson and Mason finally met formally. It was hardly love at first sight, however. Mason had his usual pointedly critical remarks to make about the production that rankled Wilson, but after Joe Cino insisted Wilson read his new play aloud to Mason (it was called *THE SANDCASTLE*) and Mason told him he thought it was the best original play he’d heard, things quieted down between them, and Wilson offered to read him his latest script, *BALM IN GILEAD*. Mason decided on the spot to direct it himself, and within a week the play was cast and slated to be performed at La MaMa. It had a huge cast—which Mason immediately cut to thirty-five—and earned the distinction of being the first full-length Off Off Broadway production. The story centers on an all-night coffee shop frequented by every type of street person imaginable, into which a lonely young woman from Chicago enters, meets a drug dealer, and falls in love, staying by his side until he is murdered. Wilson had lived in the midst of drugs ever since his arrival in New York, but had never succumbed himself. Perhaps it was seeing it at such close range in his neighborhood on the upper West Side and at the Cino, and being able to describe it so graphically in theatrical terms, that left him no stomach for it personally. Or it may have been it scared the daylights out of him. *BALM IN GILEAD* opened in January 1965 and was a critical success, but ran only two weeks—thanks to one of Ellen Stewart’s periodic shutdowns by the fuzz (this time overcrowding and fire hazards). It didn’t get a showing again until 1984, when the Circle Rep played host to a production by Chicago’s Steppenwolf Ensemble under John Malkovich’s direction. It proved a milestone for Wilson and Mason, and thereafter their names would be linked together in theater annals. It also introduced the style that was to be the trademark of Circle Rep, an intense lyric realism.

Rob Thirkield had appeared in the original production of *BALM IN GILEAD*, along with Claris Nelson and Michael Powell, and the sets were designed by Dennis Parichy. So the defunct Northwestern Productions company was still there in spirit. Rob acted in other plays besides those directed by Mason, and found the more experimental they were, the better he liked them; he was a highly regarded character actor and much in demand for his artistic daring and versatility. Two years after *BALM IN GILEAD* found him doing a season of summer stock in the Catskills, and it was there he fell in love with an aspiring young actress named Tanya Berezin. She had arrived on the New York theater scene from Philadelphia as Harriet Berezin in 1965, and had done the Caffé Cino bit—acting a little and passing the hat a lot—and knew Wilson and Mason by sight if not personally. (She would later protest to me, with hand over heart, that she was the only certifiably “normal” member of the bunch with a “normal” upbringing.)

Returning to the City after that summer, she had a hard time convincing Mason she was anything more than Thirkield’s girlfriend, after he agreed, at Rob’s pleading, to give her a role in Wilson’s newest play, *THE RIMERS OF ELDRIDGE*, when the original actress was fired. It was a mother part, for which she felt far too young, and the character was required to remain onstage throughout. Intimidated by the relentless glare of the audiences, she’d shout her lines quickly, then cower behind the nearest prop to await her next cue. In spite of her admitted ineptitude, Mason gave her another chance, this time in a revival of *THE SANDCASTLE*,

and she shouted less loudly and quickly, was less affected by the sea of faces beyond the stage, and even managed to invest the role with a hint of individual interpretation. Mason had recognized her innate ability and encouraged her with more offers; it was extraordinary on-the-job training and the beginning of a long and fruitful working relationship, during which she developed into one of the two “downtown” actresses I considered worthy enough to hold their own anywhere. The other was Ruth Maleczech.

Tanya Berezin’s looks changed little over the next twenty-five years; never an imposing figure physically (she was too short for some roles she undertook), she nevertheless possessed an infectious verve and fierce commitment that made her tower onstage, and her beautiful realizations mesmerized audiences. Her vocal range was flexible and even her trademark corona of orange hair adapted well to the characters she played. Her one drawback visually was “Myrna Loy” legs—slight thickening of the ankles—that she was very conscious of and cleverly camouflaged with long skirts, slack, dark hose and, best of all, boots.

While Berezin was appearing at La MaMa in the second production of *THE SANDCASTLE* in 1967 under Mason’s direction, cohorts Rob Thirkield, Lanford Wilson, Claris Nelson and Michael Powell were touring Europe with Ellen Stewart. Lanford Wilson was unhappy with the treatment (or non-treatment) the piece that had been chosen to represent his oeuvre was getting. Called *UNTITLED PLAY*, he’d written it especially for the La MaMa tour; but so far, in all the months of performing, it hadn’t gone into rehearsal or even been listed in advanced bookings. Arriving distraught in Edinburgh, he and Thirkield persuaded Mason and Berezin back in New York to join them so they could commiserate together; they even sent them the money for fares. But by the time they got there, Wilson was in such a state that he insisted on getting as far away from the situation as possible. He and Mason left the others and journeyed to southern Europe. During a long respite in Rome, Wilson finished the libretto he’d been working on for Lee Horby’s opera version of Tennessee Williams’ *SUMMER AND SMOKE*.

Healed by time and distance, Wilson and Mason went back to London to find La MaMa the talk of the theater community. Eager to present more American work the director of the International Theatre Club, who had booked Ellen’s troupe, urged Mason and Wilson to remain and present *UNTITLED PLAY* at the Mercury Theatre. It was too late to accept the offer then, but the next spring Mason returned with two Wilson one-acts: *HOME FREE!* and *THE MADNESS OF LADY BRIGHT*. This time Wilson, who would not fly, and Thirkield, who was still touring with the Tom O’Horgan-La MaMa team, didn’t accompany him; but Tanya Berezin did, along with Nelson and Powell.

They rehearsed at sea on the *Queen Elizabeth*, and argued what name to use for themselves at the Mercury. By majority vote, it was decided it had to be something that emphasized their “American-ness,” and so it was as The American Theatre Project they disembarked at Southampton in fog and drizzle. The London run was successful enough to fire Marshall Mason’s determination to create a permanent company when they returned home. In New York again, he convinced Jules Irving at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre to allow the group to perform in the Forum, a more intimate space downstairs at Lincoln Center. But Actors Equity intervened and prevented it, insisting they appear instead in a totally inadequate alternate theater on the other side of town that proved too large both for their style and the play Mason had chosen to do, *SPRING PLAY* by Billy Hoffman (who would become a resident Circle Rep playwright and create the searing seminal AIDS drama, *AS IS*, in 1984). The production and experience were disasters; everyone involved limped away bleeding. And so The American Theatre Project, as such, folded in 1969.

From in front of my building, Waverly Place continues west across Seventh Avenue and ends two blocks away at Bank Street, certainly one of the loveliest of the old system of roadways through Greenwich Village. At one time, when it marked the northern boundary of the city, its name had meaning—all the important banks were situated there. But as New York expanded, the banks moved to more pertinent locations, and in their places town houses were erected with elegantly simple facades and high brownstone staircases. The air of quiet gentility remained. Traffic seemed more hushed passing along it and taxi horns got no welcome

reverberations from the ancient gnarled wisteria that cascaded down the drainpipes and over the doorways. It eventually became a street where well-known people could live fairly anonymously, but within easy traveling distance to the cultural and commercial centers of the city. Willa Cather lived there until her building was torn down to make way for the new subway; Anne Bancroft and Mel Brooks lived there, as did Leontyne Price, the regal black Metropolitan Opera soprano, who could sometimes be seen in the morning slipping out of her house (the only green one on the block), down her steep stairs, and into a waiting limo, adjusting one of the elegant turbans that were her millinery trademark. Carly Simon, the pop singer, and her sister Joanna Simon, a New York City Opera diva, sang Christmas duets every year from childhood for friends and family gathered at their father's house several doors away. He was the Simon in Simon and Schuster, literary publishers, but would rather have been a respected concert pianist. (From the many afternoons I heard practicing behind the shutters of his first-floor windows, he must have spent a lot of time away from the office.)

It was in Tanya and Rob's apartment on Bank Street one day in July 1969, that a phone call signaled the advent of a brave new venture. Mason and Wilson were there at the time discussing, as always, next moves: Mason was adamant about not reviving The American Theatre Project in any form unless and until they found their own space to work in; no more being shunted about by Actors Equity from pillar to post, having to use facilities that were not adequate for their purposes, and having to deal with managements that were not sensitive to artists. The outlook was fairly bleak. All suitable spaces were either taken or unaffordable.

Then the phone call. It was from Dr. Harry Lerner, saying he had found a place on the West Side in the eighties that might fit their needs, and why didn't they high-tail it right up there and have a look.

Harry Lerner was Rob Thirkield's psychiatrist (and later Wilson's). But beyond that he was a man of many interests, mostly in the arts in New York City. He was the executive director of the World Cultural Center, an organization that had been formed to try to utilize the derelict buildings still standing from the New York World's Fair at Flushing Meadows, especially the New York Pavilion. They proposed open-air festivals and pageants celebrating local ethnic holidays; performing arts presentations; fine arts exhibits, along with folk art and craft shows; sports events; and conferences and workshops of common community concern. As an extension of this, Lerner was also the founder and executive director of the Council of International Recreation, Culture, and Lifelong Education—C.I.R.C.L.E.—a nonprofit association of civic, government and educational leaders organized in 1965, whose purpose was to “promote peace through cooperation, unify the local community, discover and develop leaders, evoke talents, ideas, and energies, and demonstrate that cultural diversities can be valued and shared to produce unity and harmony.”

Thirkield had told him all about his theater group, and Lerner felt this might be an excellent first step in developing his cultural renaissance. When the three young men arrived on the scene, however, their spirits sank. It wasn't at all what they had in mind: it was on the second floor; it was too long and narrow, and far too high; it was dingy; and, perhaps because the area was foreign to them, in the wrong place, meaning it wasn't near the Village. (The acoustical problems were discovered later.)

Wilson was the only one who thought the place had possibilities. Mason was totally turned off to it. When he got back home, he called Dr. Lerner to tell him thanks but no thanks, and was told that Lerner had already taken the loft because he thought it was such a good deal. If they didn't want it he was going to set it up with offices for C.I.R.C.L.E., but, he added, if they were to utilize the space, and take up the lease from him, they would automatically come under C.I.R.C.L.E.'s aegis, and it would function as a tax umbrella for receiving grants and donations that could only be given to not-for-profit organizations. Lerner and his staff would also have to act as members of the board of the theatrical company, and have a say in its management (which, after it was set up, Mason largely ignored).

There was too much going for the deal now, so Mason gave in and accepted the terms. Rob Thirkield assumed Lerner's lease and paid the first month's rent himself, three-hundred dollars. (It rose considerably thereafter, from four-hundred dollars to finally five-hundred dollars, and Thirkield continued paying it. In

fact he was to personally support the company for the next ten years at approximately twenty-thousand dollars a year.)

Initially, Mason had wanted the name of the company to be The American Project at the Circle Theatre. But Lerner was adamant: if they were to stay they must call themselves The Circle Theatre Company, and so they did. (It wasn't until they moved to Sheridan Square in the 1974-1975 that the group became officially known as the Circle Repertory Company.) I communicated with Lerner only by phone during the next few years, so I never had any idea what he looked like. But his voice had a stern, I'm-very-busy-what-is-it? tone that I found unpleasant to deal with for very long. However, I was told he meant well, and his voice lit up with pride when "his" theater company was discussed. It was to his organization that we were to send checks. C.I.R.C.L.E. itself gave no financial support whatever to The Circle Theatre Company, or any of the several other groups we helped sponsor (chiefly The Film Forum) under its aegis. After a series of workshops, Thirkield directed the first production in the new space on Broadway, *A PRACTICAL RITUAL TO EXORCISE FRUSTRATION AFTER FIVE DAYS OF RAIN* by David Starkweather (a holdover from Caffé Cino days), with theater stages designed by Marshall Mason, masks by playwright Doric Wilson and sets by Lanford Wilson (not related). Lanford, who had been in on the early planning stages of the company, was not really involved with it when it began life at 2307 Broadway. At first, because he was busy with his successful runs downtown, especially at Cino and La MaMa. But then, as happens with all artists some time in their careers, he experienced a fallow period when he couldn't think of anything to write about. His playwrighting had taken off so suddenly—for a while, he turned out one interesting play after another—he hadn't had time to ruminate and reflect. Now, with nothing to do but reflect, he went into a state of depression. To fill in the empty spaces widening around him he took up painting and drawing again, and soon was "hanging out" with his old buddies at the Broadway loft, busying himself with designing brochures, programs, and finally the sets for *PRACTICAL RITUAL*. Everyone agreed it was the best thing he could have done.

One of the things that lead to his writing block was very likely the fact that, although he'd been busily creating plays and having them performed, the critical receptions most of them received were less than encouraging. At thirty-two he had three full-length plays in production in succession: *THE GINGHAM DOG*, which premiered at Washington, D.C.'s Theatre Club starring George Grizzard and Diana Sands; *LEMON SKY* at the Studio Arena Theatre in Buffalo, New York, then at the New York City Stage Arena Off Off Broadway with Christopher Walken and Charles Durning; and *SERENADING LOUIS*, again in Washington at the Arena Stage. All three were pronounced failures. One, *THE GINGHAM DOG*, closed after five performances. Painting sets and designing posters for the C.I.R.C.L.E. company got him involved with actors again, and he began thinking about doing a full-length work that would incorporate many characters, like *BALM IN GILEAD*, to give all his friends work.

The end of the company's first season was where I came in, with the two versions of *THREE SISTERS* and Strindberg's *GHOST SONATA*. By then the group consisted of twenty-five members: Tanya Berezin, Beth Bowden, Patricia Carey, Mona Crawford, Linda Eskansas, Michael Feisenmeier, Robert Frink, Stephanie Gordon, Spalding Grey, Ellen Gurin, Carl David Jessup, Jane Lowry, Sharon Ann Madden, Marshall W. Mason, Henry Mellor, Roddy O'Connor, Bill Oxendine, Burke Pearson, Suzanne Pred, Bob Shields, Maria Steffann, David Stekol, Tony Tenuto, Rob Thirkield, and Alice Tweedle; there were thirteen associates including my friend Alan Hertzberg and company artist John Dowling, company architect John Deans, and composer Alonzo Levister.

The second and third seasons saw the development and strengthening of the workshop production programs in which I was most interested: reworking pieces by Chekhov and Strindberg, and introducing new American plays, like Berilla Kerr's *THE ELEPHANT IN THE HOUSE*, Helen Duberstein's *TIME SHADOWS*, and two plays by Richard Steele, *DENIM AND ROSE* and *HOWIE*, as well as new company member Conchatta Ferrell's *DANNY 405* and a revival of Lanford Wilson's *LUDLOW FAIR*. Wilson spent three

months of 1972 holed up in the sea captain's house he'd bought in Sag Harbor, Long Island, trying to finish the play with all the characters in it that was forming in his mind since his return to the fold. The relatively plotless work takes place in the shabby lobby of a once respectable, even elegant hostelry named the Hotel Baltimore where now the elderly live in lonely isolation among pimps, prostitutes and young drifters, all searching for some missing ingredient in their lives, exemplified by the spelling of the title, HOT L BALTIMORE, taken from the sign outside that has lost one of its letters. The time is Memorial Day, a time for remembrance, and as each of the fifteen characters make their entrances, the audience learns about them in engaging monologues, each as different as the people telling them, but held together by the central figure of the sympathetic desk clerk (played by Judd Hirsch).

HOT L BALTIMORE was an overnight success, and put the Circle Theatre Company on the New York theatrical map. Kermit Bloomgarden and Roger Ailes transferred it from the loft to Off Broadway's Circle-In-The-Square Downtown theater on Bleeker Street in March 1973. The entire cast helped in the physical move; it took every available hand to lug all the scenery and props to Greenwich Village. All the original performers continued in their roles, listed in this order:

Bill Lewis	Judd Hirsch
Girl	Trish Hawkins
Milly	Helen Stenborg
Mrs. Bellotti	Henrietta Bagley
April Green	Conchatta Ferrell
Mr. Morris	Rob Thirkield
Jackie	Mari Gorman
Jamie	Zane Lasky
Mr. Katz	Antony Tenuta
Suzy	Stephanie Gordon
Suzy's John	Burke Pearson
Paul Granger III	Johathan Hogan
Mrs. Oxenham	Louise Clay
Cab Driver	Peter Tripp
Delivery Boy	Marcial Gonzales

(It is interesting to note that Tanya Berezin did not appear in the cast. She was playing another role—that of real life expectant mother, second time around.)

The flyer for the original studio production was designed by Wilson—hand drawn in red on a deep yellow ground was a slanted marquee reading HOT L BALTIMORE at the top and under it, also hand lettered (and very likely by Wilson) the names of all the performers. Marshall Mason sent me one of them with this note inked in pale blue along one margin:

Dear Donn—*Please* try to catch this show—Lanford is great!!
Thanks for the grant for '73—it came in the nick of time.

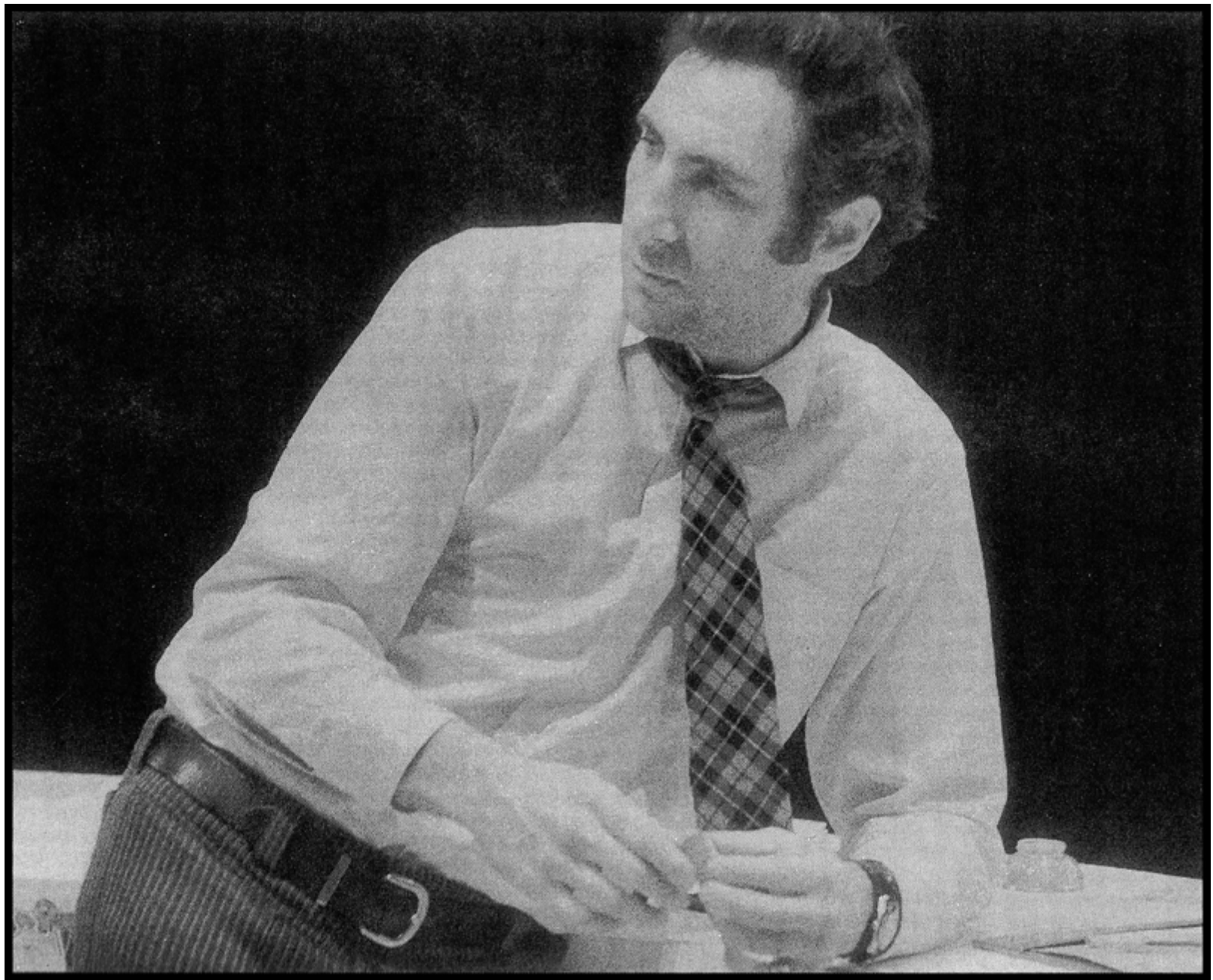
Marshall

P.S. Lanford is a great *fan* of your work too.

It was the fourth, and so far the best season for the company. The reviews for HOT L when it moved downtown were generally excellent. Clive Barnes in *The New York Times* said it heralded a new era; in a long detailed critique in *Women's Wear Daily*, Martin Gottfried hailed Wilson's craftsmanship and sensitivity, Mason's superb direction, and the result a work of genuine wonderful theater.

HOT L BALTIMORE won the first of many awards the Circle Rep would receive. For Wilson, it garnered the 1973 Outer Critics Circle Award, the 1973 New York Drama Critics Award, the 1973 Obie for Best Play, and it was placed in the *Ten Best Plays* annual of that year.

Marshall Mason won the 1973 Obie for Distinguished Direction. Mari Gorman won the 1973 Obie for



THE HOT L BALTIMORE 1973 Judd Hirsch

Distinguished Performance, the 1973 Drama Desk Award for Best Performance, the Theatre World Award, and the Clarence Derwent Award for Best Performance. Trish Hawkins won the 1973 Drama Desk Award for Most Promising Performance, and the Theatre World Award.

Success, as so often happens, followed success for the company. Its fifth season double-dittoed the fourth with two productions that went on to commercial runs after they played the loft; *WHEN YOU COMIN' BACK, RED RYDER?*, by Mark Medoff, and *THE SEA HORSE* by Edward J. Moore.

An interesting sidelight to *THE SEA HORSE* was the mimeographed program from the original production in the Broadway loft that opened on March 3, 1974. At the top was a drawing of a probable sign that might have hung outside the lonely "bar on the West Coast Waterfront." The words *THE SEA HORSE* appeared on it, the *THE* small in top center and under it in larger carved letters, *SEA HORSE*, with the first *S* shaped like a seahorse, and the *H* made from two facing seahorses with a small ball connecting their stomachs. Beneath the sign, in the center of the playbill, is printed; By *JAMES IRWIN*, Directed by *MARSHALL W. MASON*; then in smaller letters under that, sets by David Potts, costumes by Jennifer von Mayrhouser, and lights by Cheryl Thacker. Below that, in larger letters with the last names in caps was: with Conchatta *FERRELL* & Edward J. *MOORE*. As it turned out, "James Irwin" was a fictitious name thrown in to disguise the fact that Ed Moore had written the play as a vehicle for himself, but was unwilling to admit publicly to being *both* author *and* costar, in case it flopped. He needn't have worried, of course, and in listings later it was credited to Edward J. Moore. Guernsey wrote, "He succeeded admirably in both persons, reminding us that perhaps the good old practice of writing for specific actors, a la Shakespeare, Moliere, etc., should be put in

use more often in modern theater.”

Again there were prizes galore: RED RYDER won the Outer Critics Circle Award for Distinguished Play; Medoff, the 1974 Drama Desk Award as Outstanding New Playwright; and it was included in *The Ten Best Plays* of 1974; Kevin Conway won an Obie for Distinguished Performance and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Performance; Elizabeth Sturges also won a 1974 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Performance in the same play, as well as an Obie for Distinguished Performance. The Theatre World Award went to Conchatta Ferrell for THE SEA HORSE. She was a consistent favorite (I considered her one of our best character actors); moon faced, dumpy, yet marvelous in every role she essayed. She left Circle Rep in the early 1980s for the greener fields of Hollywood, and, though she never gained star status in any of the films she did, her performances were solid, intelligent, and satisfying. As a tribute to her beginnings (and perhaps with a touch of nostalgia) she created a theater group in Los Angeles in 1988, and called it Circle Rep West.

The company was obviously outgrowing its confined spaces on upper Broadway, and it was time to sever ties with Dr. Lerner and C.I.R.C.L.E. Thirkield bought its independence, and also began looking for a new home. Choosing the location was not difficult; finding a big enough space for a bona fide theater was. He solved it when he came across the Sheridan Square Playhouse on lower Seventh Avenue back in Greenwich Village. The rent was a whopping two-thousand dollars a month, but the location was great.

The building was a part of a historic landmark district—the one I described living in in Chapter Two, with full view of its tarpapered roof from my fire escape. It began life as a humble garage. (In fact, after later extensive exterior sandblasting, the word GARAGE was revealed inlaid with blue mosaic tiles above the doorway.) In the 1920s, it was well-known as the “Nut Club,” a fancy bar that attracted such uptown luminaries as Billy Rose. Then it was converted to a legitimate theater and named for the triangular (not square) configuration it almost touched. Very little had to be done to the insides. It already had air-conditioning and there were dressing rooms (albeit tiny) just inside the main entrance. The seating was all movable, and the stage could be set up anywhere.

Rob Thirkield signed a ten-year lease on the playhouse in October 1974, and it was ready just weeks before the opening of the first play of the new season, Tennessee Williams’ BATTLE OF ANGELS. Getting the old audiences to come down to the Village was almost as difficult as trying to get a fix on the famous playwright in their midst. Williams came to work with the company at the urging of Mason, who was delighted and flattered when he accepted. But the man had come out of a decade of hell, and all the scars showed. He was wary of everybody, frightened about his play (he hadn’t had an encouraging review for years), and well aware that the group was treating him like a precious heirloom. He seemed happiest when sashaying around the local bars in his mink coat, (literally) drinking up the local color and slapping pinball machines.

BATTLE OF ANGELS got mostly favorable, if not glowing, notices. It was popular with theatergoers who were curious to see if the country’s greatest/ worst playwright had regained his genius or fallen flat on his face again, and to catch a glimpse of the new little theater off Sheridan Square. Serendipitously, they received a surprise bonus—the discovery of a brand-new, highly talented stage designer named John Lee Beatty, who was to be as responsible as any other single member for defining the “look” of the Circle Rep in succeeding years. He won his first Obie for this set design in 1975, and joined ranks with Tanya Berezin as the company’s second resident redhead.

The move downtown signaled the end of the Circle Rep’s Off Off Broadway status. It joined similar groups working close to mainstream theater like the Manhattan Theater Club and The American Place, and was categorized “Off Broadway.” It also signalled our lessening involvement with it. The company had happily outgrown us. But I was invited to attend new productions for many years afterward, and we continued giving grants for specific projects, mainly those involving new playwrights. My personal interest waned at almost the same time that Rob Thirkield grew disenchanted with the group and its direction into what he called ‘dangerous commercial territory’ This was after the disastrous production of Frank Wedekind’s LULU he

directed in the 1977-1978 season. He had shown great courage mounting the play to begin with. It had first been presented in Vienna in 1905, but its sexually erotic and explicit account of a young woman's progression from boudoirs to bedfellows, written in heavy German Expressionistic style, never fared well in English translation, and the only other time it had been done in New York was, strangely enough, at the very same theater, then the Sheridan Square Playhouse, where it closed after one performance in 1970. Thirkield felt diminished by the seeming lack of solace or sympathy from the rest of the company afterwards; it was as if he alone had chosen to go out on a limb, and when it broke, no one was around to help soften his fall. He felt the company was growing more conservative as it became more successful commercially, and it was no longer willing to take the risks that work like LULU mandated. It was the last production Thirkield participated in directly at Circle Rep, and with him went that special sense of adventurous daredevilry that I had found so attractive in the young company. His recent divorce from Tanya hadn't lightened his feeling of failure, either. He remained on the Board of Directors of Circle Rep, but his interests were centered more and more on a new company he helped found called the River Arts Repertory in Woodstock, New York. Woodstock was near a summer place he'd rented for the Circle Rep troupe to live and work in during hot months, and he had grown to love the area. It was to there he retreated to grapple with his own personal demons, leaving many on the outside to wonder why his former associates had turned their backs on him; there were probably as many reasons as members involved. But whatever the cause, they lost a talented performer and teacher who contributed far more than initial funding. His gift was the special joy of discovery that imbued the air around every production he touched.

Rob Thirkield's demons continued to torment him and in July 1986, in Marshall Mason's words, he "succumbed to the private struggles within his soul and committed suicide." The Circle Repertory Company (which, ironically, after its beginnings, was never a true repertory) continued doing what it did best: present realistic plays that spoke to the peculiarly American psyche, just as Marshall Mason had originally meant it to. As an organization, it grew larger and more businesslike. The tiny office space beside the dressing rooms at the GARAGE had to be moved and expanded several times, ending up in a floor-through on lower Sixth Avenue near Soho, where creative chaos reigned. Craig Lucas, a company playwright whose early Off Off Broadway work, BLUE WINDOW was his first to transfer to the big time, wrote, "You can stop by the Circle Rep offices just about any day of the week and find room after room filled with actors, directors, writers, all working on some project or other. I have no idea what most of them are doing or even who half of them are. I've never tried to get into the building after midnight but I imagine some of them are still there. My idea of heaven is a big empty room with no windows, doors shut, wonderful actors working on a new play, learning to trust their director, and that laughter emanating from within the room, that shared reverence. Because they know, or they hope, they have something remarkable to bring to light four weeks hence. Circle Rep provides lots and lots of room for lots and lots of people to invent their own heavens and I am delighted to have been invited to join the party."

As the company prospered, so it attracted ever stronger acting talent. Mason had always encouraged the members to go off and become famous and earn lots of money, but then return to be nourished by and give nourishment to the "family". A number did. Among those who left for careers in film and television and periodically returned were Christopher Reeve, Jeff Daniels, Beatrice Straight, Richard Thomas, Judd Hirsch, Fritz Weaver, Tony Roberts, and William Hurt.

There are many in the theater community who believe the company would never have lasted without Lanford Wilson, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1980 for TALLEY'S FOLLY, starring Judd Hirsch and Trish Hawkins, and whose "words" were the very essence of the company for all but the first years. All of his major (and most of his minor) plays were produced first at Circle Rep, from THE HOT L BALTIMORE, to BALM IN GILEAD, ANGELS FALL, THE MOUND BUILDERS, LEMON SKY, THE 5TH OF JULY, TALLEY AND SON, and BURN THIS. The fact that he opted to remain as the company's most important playwright after Marshall Mason's 1986 decision to resign as Artistic Director, indicated he needed the company as

much as it did him. I always felt the company's great strength was rooted in the happy mating of those two men's minds, so it was anybody's guess what would happen with one of them gone. My guess was they would work together again as independents.

Mason had already taken several extended sabbaticals in recent years, tentatively exploring other avenues of interest, like film directing. But the final decision to leave was prompted by Thirkield's suicide and the death of another old and dear friend, Neil Flanagan, of AIDS, within weeks of each other. He was suddenly made painfully aware of the fragility and brevity of life, and that, if he wanted to achieve any other goals, he'd better pursue them while there was still time. In May 1987, he moved to Los Angeles.

The next March, Tanya Berezin was made acting Artistic Director; five months later she became Artistic Director, and was still at the helm for the remainder of years covered here. My regret was that she had to virtually abandon her acting career to cope with her new duties. Management's gain was the theater public's loss. She was one of the very best performers New York produced.

The summer of 1981 had been a scorcher everywhere else. Word was that New York City streets were lava flows and Boston was reduced to wavy blurs as thermometers hit ninety and stayed there. The hot spell had hung on so long it was affecting behavioral patterns: habitually even-tempered men, down to their underwear, were tossing nagging wives out of windows in the Bronx and usually compliant women in Roxbury were shoving grumpy spouses under streetcars. But thirty miles out in the Atlantic off Cape Cod we were unaffected and blithely complacent. Nantucket Island remained a paradise of soft breezes, tantalizing cool breakers, and polyester-perfect day-trippers the overworked ferries disgorged at scheduled intervals to swarm over our narrow streets, crowd our shops, and keep us in business.

I was seated with a book in a canvas chair under a tree that shaded the doorway to my weather-beaten little print gallery, one of a huddle of converted fishermen's shanties clinging to both water sides of Old South Wharf—now arts and crafts studios and specialty shops—which, at that time of year, were dwarfed by the masts of moored yachts bobbing beside them in the harbor like great metronomes. In the distance, back at the entrance to the wharf, I detected the newest batch of tourists approaching the crushed-shell central walkway, and, figuring it would be another twenty minutes to half hour of browsing and boat-ogling before any of them reached my place, I resumed reading.

For over a decade Nantucket had been my summer retreat, and I'd had the gallery for about a year—long enough to have got to know all the other wharf "rats," especially Tina, the barefoot proprietor of an apparel boutique in the shanty across the walkway from mine. I wished at the moment that she were there to pass the time with instead of a book. But what she peddled was Greek widows' underslips she'd collected in her travels, and, although some of them were very prettily edged in lace and delicate embroidery, she'd had a difficult time convincing summer ladies they would make terrific casual party dresses. So she played hooky a lot. Dark-eyed, attractive, and restless, she found any number of excuses to be away doing other things. At the moment she was somewhere off Nova Scotia—or was it Newfoundland?—sailing with a couple German yachtsmen who passed her seated on her stoop one afternoon and asked if she wanted to have a little fun. I kept her shop open for a few days. But, with no discernible interest in her merchandise, I gave up and penciled a note in her window that the place was closed due to illness. She'd now been gone almost two weeks.

I was engrossed enough in the book not to notice the figure approaching me until a shadow fell across my face, making me look up to see who it was blocking the light.

"Excuse me," said the tall silhouette, "d'you know where I can find someone named Tina?"

Waving him around to the side of the chair so I didn't have to squint, I explained she was off sailing and no one knew when she'd be back.

"Shit," he muttered. "She's a friend of one of my brothers. I've been sailing with them for the last week, and when they let me off on the wharf, I asked them where I could get cleaned up and change, and they said look

up Tina, she'd know. I'm soaked through and covered with salt, man." Dropping his duffel bag, he rubbed his neck and elbow. "You wouldn't know of a place, would you?"

I said sure, and gave him my key to the private showers two shanties away, then added that if he wanted more room to change he was welcome to use my gallery. No one would notice the doors closed for a few minutes. With a grateful sigh, he plopped into the empty seat opposite. Even with wet long hair and granny sunglasses hiding his eyes, I had a funny feeling I knew him from somewhere but couldn't place the locale. I introduced myself, thinking I might recognize the name when he reciprocated. He said, "Bill Hurt." William Hurt? "Yes." Circle Rep? "Yah."

Small world, says I, and told him of my affiliation with the company that went back almost to its beginnings. With a couple whadya-knows! and whadda-coincidences!, we settled down to the problem of getting the barnacles scraped off him. I fetched the key while he unzipped the bag and took out a shaving kit and towel, and he ambled off toward the little shed I indicated. The T-shirt stuck to his back, and, where his shorts had hiked up from sitting, white slivers of skin shone above the edges of a sore looking sunburn that traveled the length of his legs to the calves. Looking at his legs reminded me that the last time I saw him perform at Circle Rep was in the 1979-1980 production of HAMLET and his all-black costume included tights that, I thought, made his legs look rather spindly. But here they were perfectly normal. When I mentioned it to him later, he laughed and said, yes, he felt like a spider in that outfit and was self-conscious about it.

It was in that production that Circle Rep, although it wouldn't admit as much, began its "star" system, that was to lead to controversy and ill will among the rank-and-file acting members of the troupe. Before HAMLET, the cast was listed in alphabetical order. But the posters for that play displayed William Hurt's name large and above the others. The management's thinking was that he had become so well known to New York audiences by then that his name would be a much-needed draw.

Certainly he had had a mercurial rise in the short time he had been with the company. He joined in 1974, the same year that Tennessee Williams arrived to work on BATTLE OF ANGELS, and found his career launched in the 1976-1977 play MY LIFE, by Corinne Jacket The work itself got lukewarm notices. It centered on a successful young physicist, Eddie Howe, who was constantly plagued by memories of his adolescence that kept "swimming" into the present. The swimming analogy was augmented by a real swimming pool that dominated the center of the set, and in which every character eventually took a plunge. Mel Gussow, in *The New York Times*, called it a study in tracing human behavioral roots that was at once confused and contradictory. The clever set by David Potts was a multilevel jumble of pigeon hole rooms in different styles where people moved in and out of time and even conversed with younger versions of themselves. Most of the roles were played by two actors—the older Eddie by William Hurt and his adolescent self by a promising newcomer, Jeff Daniels, for example. Hurt was singled out by Michael Feingold in *The Village Voice* as 'the incarnation of slightly wounded success,' and all critics praised the cast, which also included Tanya Berezin, Jo Henderson, Douglass Watson, Roger Chapman, Nancy Snyder, Claire Malis, and, marking the beginning of an illustrious career, Christopher Reeve as, of all things, the Grandfather. Hurt won an Obie for Distinguished Performance in it, as did Jo Henderson.

The next year William Hurt starred in the second of Lanford Wilson's "Talley Family" plays, THE 5TH OF JULY (there would be three in all-TALLEY'S FOLLY being the first, and TALLEY AND SON the last). He played Ken Talley III, a Vietnam vet who had lost the use of both legs in the war and depended on his male lover (Jeff Daniels) for everything. Like HOT L BALTIMORE, there was less emphasis on plot than on the characterizations of the large cast of mostly young people caught up in trying to find their identities in the 1970s. Instead of worrying about losing an old hotel, their concern was the probable relinquishing of the old Missouri family mansion.

In 1978-1979, he appeared in what I thought was his best role with the Circle Rep: the nonconformist young priest, Father Rivard, in the revival of Milan Stilt's THE RUNNER STUMBLES, which had been presented

on Broadway in 1976, after first being mounted at the Hartman Theater in Stamford, CT, then at Yale, and the Berkshire Festival in Massachusetts. It is a dark study in conflicting beliefs, loneliness, and longings, involving the father and a young spirited nun, Sister Rita (Joyce Reehling), as they become inevitably and tragically attracted to each other after her arrival to work in his tiny parish, observed with scorn by his unbendingly orthodox housekeeper (Elizabeth Sturges). The story, based on a real trial in Michigan in 1911, unfolds in a series of flashbacks from the priest's prison cell after his arrest for the young woman's murder.



HAMLET 1980
Jacqueline Brookes and William Hurt

The production showcased Hurt's unique talent for portraying characters of disillusioned intelligence and brooding introspection with great sensitivity.

He returned from the shower room looking and feeling much better, and took his duffel bag inside the gal-

lery. I followed him and closed the waterside door, then back-tracked out the walkway door, shutting it behind me. In no time he changed into tan cotton pants and a dark polo shirt, reopened the doors and sat down again, stuffing the wet gear into the bag on the ground. He locked fingers behind his head, stretched, and smiled. "Now I feel human again." His hair developed blond streaks as it dried and was tousled by the breezes easing in from the bay. There was a slight cleft in the strong chin that had been hidden by a ginger-tinged growth of beard the last time I saw him, in the HAMLET production. He had received very respectable reviews for the role, and also as Davison in Schiller's MARY STUART that ran in repertory with it (the only time to my knowledge, after it got established, that the Circle Rep was really rep), but I felt he was somewhat uncomfortable in them, and asked him how he thought he did.

"Well, I'm not really a classical actor, I guess. As much as I tried, I just didn't feel right for the Shakespeare. It will never go down in history as one of the greatest interpretations, that's for sooth." And it was then we discussed the black tights and his self-consciousness in period costumes.

He had high praise for the rest of the cast, however, which was uniformly excellent, especially Lindsay Crouse in the role of Aphelia, and first Beatrice Straight, then Jacqueline Brookes (my Waverly Place neighbor) as his mother Gertrude. He added that he was glad he did the play, and felt he had learned something from the experience, if only what his limitations were.

When I asked him again how he got to be on Nantucket, he said it was kind of a long story, but revolved around the fact that he and his two brothers hadn't been together much since childhood to share many experiences. His father was a U.S. State Department official and had settled the family in one exotic South Pacific locale after another in the course of his duty. But when Bill was still a child, his parents divorced, and he lived with his mother briefly in New York until she remarried Henry Luce 3rd, the son of the founder of *Time* magazine. He was sent to the elite Middlesex School in Massachusetts, and then entered Tufts College in Medford, Massachusetts, majoring first in theology and then switching to theater. After graduation, he continued acting studies at Juilliard in New York, then went to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival to play Edmund in O'Neill's LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT, to the Meadowbrook Theatre in Detroit to portray Jack Tanner in Shaw's MAN AND SUPERMAN, and back to Manhattan to appear in The New York Shakespeare Festival in the Park production of HENRY V.

Ending a long breathless litany of past events with, "...and now with this *film* thing that I've been involved in for the past two years taking up so much time on the coast, I figured, hey, I'm thirty-one years old already, and the way things are going I may never see any of my family again if I don't grab the chance when it presents itself." When he learned his brothers were planning a week's sail off New England, he decided to fly up from New York and join them. It had been a great week, and he was only sorry they couldn't have got together more often and sooner.

"What film thing?" I asked, latching onto the penultimate. I knew from Tanya Berezin that he had been offered roles in Hollywood movies ever since MY LIFE in 1977. He had all the makings of a screen star, but so far had turned them down to continue working on the New York stage.

"Oh God, I wonder now sometimes why I ever got myself involved," he moaned unconvincingly, sucking air through clenched teeth and raising both hands into talons. "Man, it was a nightmare! Really hell." The "hell" was in accepting an offer to do one film in Hollywood, and staying on to make two more in succession. The first was an offer he couldn't refuse. Hurt had liked and admired the director Ken Russell for a long time and thought that if he ever did begin to get serious about doing films, he would like to work with him. Quirky, quixotic, often flamboyantly excessive to the extreme in his pictures, Russell, an Englishman, was the current bete noir of movieland. He never stopped being experimental even after he was considered Establishment. Bill also liked the writings of Paddy Chayefsky, especially his short stories. So when he learned that Russell was planning to do a film based on one of Chayefsky's novels and wanted him for the lead, he "succumbed." It was titled *Altered States* and was an amusing elaboration on the old Jeckyl and Hyde switch

with sci-fi overtones. A young psychophysiological (a specialist in the study of mental organs) devises a sensory deprivation tank to hallucinate himself back into the primal condition of human evolution, in which guise he rises to go out and kill. The production was shot through with incredible visual effects, most of them happening with hair-raising proximity to the new star. Hurt said he was never so frightened in his life as when working on that set. Besides the effects, he was required to spend hours naked in an enclosed tank, half submerged in water, with all kinds of attachments and wires stuck to his body.

“I was on everything by the time we got through shooting—uppers, downers, you name it. And I lost almost twenty pounds in the process. I vowed never to do a film like that again, no matter what they offered.” (At the time he was telling me this, none of the pictures had yet been distributed: by coincidence they were released one right after another, practically assuring him star status from the triple exposure. When the critics reviewed *Altered States*, they treated the story with amusing disdain, but he got good notices from most of them, who recognized a star in the making. The television film expert Roger Ebert called it “a feast for special effects lovers and drugged philosophy majors only.” Pauline Kael gave it her usual acerbic short shrift, “The psychedelic visions come at you like choppy slide shows, and the picture had a dismal, tired, humanistic ending.”)

The movers and shakers of Hollywood saw in him a new leading male love object, and he was next offered a totally different kind of role, but one with its own creepy overtones. Since he was already there, he said, he agreed to do it, after a brief respite from the rigors of his debut. The script had all the ingredients for popular success: smoldering nude sex scenes by firelight, suspense, betrayal and murder. Called *Body Heat*, it was an updated rehash of *Double Indemnity*, about a Florida lawyer who gets romantically involved with a very attractive married woman, and how they plot to bump off her businessman husband. Again, the movie hadn’t been released when he described it to me, but he had special praise for his costar Kathleen Turner, and felt she would be a big name someday. (When *Body Heat* opened, it was a solid box-office hit, adding more luster to both their careers. But the critics called it “oversexed” and “superfluous.”)

“I know it seems like I was asking for it, but when they offered me a third picture right away, I thought, ‘Well, I’ll do it and get it all out of my system and go back to New York and live theater.’ I hadn’t seen much of L.A. because I was either working or recovering from it, but I didn’t like the west coast, just generally. I can’t explain it, but L.A. was not my town.”

The picture was *Eye Witness*, an odd little thriller written by Steve Tesich (whose play *NOURISH THE BEAST* was the one I designed the poster for The American Place Theater in 1973.) It centered on a bashful janitor (Hurt in an old button-down cardigan sweater) who had a crush on a TV star and followed her about, only to be hunted down himself by a murderer afraid he could identify him. The cast, Bill said, was again a delight to work with. It included Sigourney Weaver, Christopher Plummer, and Irene Worth. (When it came out, it had a healthy reception, but most reviewers agreed its problem was the inability to concentrate on the plot.)

“So, that’s what I’ve been up to lately. I don’t know if anything will come of them or not. but one thing I do know is that I am tired and drained from the experience, and at the moment I don’t care if I ever see Hollywood again.”

Being such a private person, had he given any thought to how he would handle it if the pictures should catapult him to fame?

He looked up at the sky and ran a hand through his hair. “I hate the term ‘movie star’. It has a derogatory connotation for me. I don’t want to be a ‘movie star’ in the old icon-image way.” He continued that, as far as he was concerned now, recognition in Hollywood would mean having the clout to be able to choose roles that were interesting and challenging to him—ones that could be explored in depth—and reject those that cast him into a stereotype mold like some soap opera sex symbol. But this was all conjecture and projection. Maybe nothing at all would come of it. The only thing he knew for sure at the moment was that, if he went

back to making films, “I’d only do one a year!”

Hurt smiled ruefully, looked at his wrist watch, and stood up and stretched. He didn’t have a plane reservation, so he figured he’d better walk into town and grab a taxi to the airport. There was still a chance he could get back to New York by dusk. We shook hands and he thanked me for the use of the gallery as a changing room. “Next time I’ll look at the pictures,” he quipped. With the duffel bag thrown over one shoulder, he started off down the wharf, turning back once with a brief salute, and was soon lost in the jumble of shanties and strollers who were beginning to appear in numbers again after a gorgeous day at the beach.

No one recognized him or dashed to get his autograph. But the next summer, when young women heard that I had entertained William Hurt on Old South Wharf, they asked to see the spot in the gallery where he changed clothes. He had become a “movie star” in spite of himself, yet, to his credit, in the ensuing years he remained true to his convictions. He chose quirky, unusual roles that interested him in stories that often allowed other actors to outshine him. For example, in the next film in which he appeared, *The Big Chill* (1983), he was almost lost in the large cast, and played the only unsympathetic part, that of a cynical, snide loner among the group of old friends, now thirty-something, who were reunited for the funeral of one of them, allowing most of the kudos to go to Kevin Kline and Glenn Close. In *Gorky Park*, made in the same year (he hadn’t stuck to his resolution after all), he allowed his hair to be darkened less attractively to lend more credence to the Slavic-type character he portrayed in the Russian spy thriller.

His most outstanding achievement was in the role of the sad homosexual dreamer Molina in *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), with screenplay by Leonard Schrader from the novel by Manuel Puig, about the relationship between two very different prisoners made to share a filthy South American jail cell. Hurt won a 1985 Oscar for Best Actor in it, for a part that he almost didn’t play. He had been cast as the other prisoner, a hardened macho political renegade, and Raoul Julia had been assigned the transvestite role. But in rehearsals they tried switching parts, and found themselves more comfortable with the results. It gave Hurt another personality to investigate that he hadn’t attempted before, and it forever banished any qualms the front office had about successfully playing against type.

Bill Hurt kept his resolve and made one film in each of the next three years, beginning with *Children of a Lesser God* in 1986, the story of a young deaf woman who resists learning to speak from fear of what the “real” world might be like. He played the more subdued role of her speech therapist (with whom she falls in love) and was nominated for Best Actor. Marlee Matlin, as the young woman, won Best Actress Award. In 1987 he did *Broadcast News*, a mildly amusing spoof on the television communications industry, in which he played a not-too-bright anchor man, again allowing his co-actors Holly Hunter, Lois Chiles, Albert Brooks, and Robert Prosky to capture the spotlight. He teamed up again with Kathleen Turner in 1988 for *The Accidental Tourist*, an alternately funny and tender rendering of Anne Tyler’s best-selling novel. It centers on a travel writer (Hurt) who has been devastated by the death of his little son and the subsequent departure of his wife (Turner). It takes a trip to a vet hospital and a kooky dog trainer (Geena Davis) to finally pull him (and his pooch) out of the doldrums. It was one of Bill Hurt’s most satisfying interpretations: slowly developed, marvelously restrained, and seeming to effortlessly convey the most emotion with the subtlest facial gestures. The film was nominated for Best Picture, Screenplay Adaptation, and Original Score, and Davis garnered an Oscar for her comical, yet touching reading. The rest of the excellent cast included Ed Begley Jr., Amy Wright, and Bill Pullman.

Hurt did not abandon the theater during those years. He returned periodically to Circle Rep to, in the words of Marshall Mason, “be renourished, and give nourishment.” In the twentieth anniversary commemorative program issued by the Circle Rep, one page was devoted to grateful quotes from company members. He wrote, “For me, Circle Rep has embodied the central, positive goal of any active, vital theatre organization—an undistracted environment for the director, writer, actor and technician to freely attempt his/her heart’s desire—the solution of the play. “The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.”

In 1981, he rejoined Lindsay Crouse in Romulus Linney's fine study of the relationship between the poet Lord Byron and his daughter in *CHILDE BYRON* at Circle Rep (again donning black tights and period costume), and in June 1984 he was in the original Off Broadway cast of David Rabe's *HURLYBURLY*, directed by Mike Nichols, basically about the same generation as in *The Big Chill*, but now adrift in a sex-and-cocaine-laced existence on the periphery of the Hollywood film business. It was such a success it was transferred to Broadway for a healthy stay and was considered the best new American play of the season. The large cast changed during the run as often as the weather, but, before they departed, Hurt and Judith Ivey both won Tony nominations for best actors.

At the Yale Repertory Theater in New Haven in 1991, William Hurt tackled Chekhov. Under the artistic director of the Moscow Art Theater, Oleg Yefremov, he assumed the title role in *IVANOV*, ably assisted by a strong cast that included Austin Pendleton, Frances Conroy, Lee Richardson, Zeljko Ivanek, and Anne Pitoniak. Interesting in minute details, the overall production was considered a disappointment. Frank Rich of *The New York Times* spoke for the majority of critics, praising the experiment but finding the results failed to fulfill the high standards of either the Soviet or American artists' past achievements.

And so, in the decade since he relaxed under the tree on the wharf in the middle of Nantucket Harbor, he had earned an estimable reputation in both theater and film worlds. Amid the trappings of stardom, with its attendant hoopla and over-hype, he intelligently retained his self-identity, and, even more remarkable in the age of TV-talk-show-instant-replay true confessions, his privacy as well. He remained dedicated to his craft, and whether the results were considered successful or not, he treated each assignment as an experimental journey whose taking, alone, was worth the effort. It was therefore gratifying to have shared a few early moments with William Hurt the young actor/explorer—on the verge.

★ ★ ★

FILM FORUM

The second floor loft in a nondescript brownstone at 256 West 88th Street had once been the “reading” room of a palmist who aptly dubbed herself Madame Palmer. But not even a fortune teller could have foreseen that the tiny, inspired project that was begun there in 1970, called The Film Forum, would eventually become one of New York City's most important and revered institutions for the screening of unusual and artistic non-commercial films. What began on a shoestring grew to fill a large pair of shoes, and then some.

The building was another of Dr. Harry Lerner's “finds,” and again showed his inability to resist a bargain in real estate even when the space was inadequate for its purposes. It was so narrow that there was only room for a pot-bellied bay front containing three skinny windows across the facade on each of the three floors above ground level, and the whole was incongruously topped off with a peak that looked like a flattened dunce cap or Dixie cup, decorated with a central brooch of indifferently intertwined scroll work.

Under the aegis of his cultural uplift society, C.I.R.C.L.E., Lerner offered the lease to the Forum's originators: Peter Feinstein, a twenty-six year old former lawyer with impressive sideburns, mustache, and gold-rimmed glasses; and Sandy Miller, also twenty-six, who had previously been a financial reporter. We first learned of it from Lerner himself. Although the good doctor had pressed the space on them, calling it a steal, and would allow them to receive funding under the C.I.R.C.L.E.'s nonprofit status, as he had with Circle Rep, he again was unable to offer them any financial support, and there was the immediate concern of paying the initial three-hundred dollars for the first month's rent. Steal or no steal, neither of the new co-directors had enough between them to afford it and also renovate the place into a useful film screening theater. Lerner turned to us to work tiny miracles like we did for Circle Rep.

Having already been involved with related projects like Film Archives and Millennium, I wanted to know

what made this one unique enough to be considered anything more than a repetition of what already existed. Miller explained that although neither he nor Feinstein had ever been involved in making films, they recognized a need for a place where individuals with limited funds could show 16mm films—the home movies kind—and explore their possibilities within a noncommercial framework. As William Schillaci pointed out in a *Washington Square Journal* article in November 1970, “If anything has been preventing the flowering of the filmic art into its greatest potential it has been the restrictive business aspects of the medium. Not only do exorbitant distributive and technical costs frequently discourage attempts at production, but the pack ‘em in, herd ‘em out policies of commercial movie theatres are hardly conducive to on the spot audience involvement.

“A creative new enterprise called The Film Forum addresses itself to these problems and eliminates at least half of them. Located in a small but handsomely constructed and comfortable loft, The Film Forum opens its doors to both the independent filmmaker and those individuals who seek to carry the movie experience beyond the darkened theatre.”

Feinstein and Miller said they planned to invite anybody who had a film to show to appear and they would assure them that there would be a sympathetic, supportive audience of peers on hand for every viewing, who would discuss their work and offer constructive criticisms later in an informal atmosphere over coffee and oatmeal cookies. (The trusty stainless steel fifty-copper was kept perking all the time, and bread and cheese were promised in the future if things worked out—and we came up with enough dough!).

With an initial grant from us, they set about physically revamping the “Lerner Lemon.” As it turned out, the extreme narrowness of the interior space worked well at creating an intimate relationship with the small screen up front. No seat was too far to either side to cause distortions, and the walls acted as blinders to keep the eye concentrated on the moving image. The ceiling was a problem, no question. In some places it was so low you could touch it. Downright claustrophobic. Their solution was to paint it and the walls a deep infinite blue, and cover the floor and four-inch high platform in the rear with a heavy pile carpeting nearly the same color, giving the sensation of floating in infinite space when the lights were dimmed. Fifty folding chairs could be accommodated with a three-foot aisle down the middle lit by tiny built-in bulbs. Two feet behind the floating screen, a dark curtain was installed to absorb any spill-over from the projector. (I liked to think it was velvet, in deference to the previous tenant—velvet had a way of absorbing the vibrations from the nether world also.)

At the back of the room, some forty feet from the screen was a partly enclosed office and storage space, in the middle of which stood an isolated projection booth with a glass front that muffled much of the whirr of the projector. The designer of all this successful renovation turned out to be Clark Gesner, the same Clark Gesner who wrote the music and lyrics (and book too, under another name) for *YOU’RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN*, the long-running musical playing at the theater I literally stumbled into in Chapter Five. Not a very communicative chap, he never satisfactorily revealed how he got from there to here, but never mind. The results were stunning and made all of us very proud.

The first night I attended a screening, he was at the door taking the money. The price of admission was two-dollars-fifty-cents (for the first visit, then one dollar for subsequent returns) and mostly students packed the room, with a few curious locals spotted here and there. Two of the films shown that evening remained memorable: one called *Beethoven’s Chicken* by David Devensky was a true horror movie that kept the audience spellbound; and the other was *Old Time Comedy Night* also by Devensky that was a very funny and appropriate pastiche on movie audiences. The rest of the program was less compelling, but it set the pattern for many years to follow. The point was to show as much of the genre as possible to maybe uncover the hidden jewels.

A writer for *The New Yorker* visited the Forum several weeks later, in December 1970, and told of meeting Miller and Feinstein and being shown around the premises. He went on to describe the audience as “mostly

kids,” except for two middle-aged couples who remained to the side and back, benignly smiling on the proceedings. At one point he saw Feinstein approach one of the ladies and say, “Hello, Mother,” and proceed to tell her that the crowd was so good she hadn’t really had to show up after all, but thanked her for her thoughtfulness.

“We wanted to come,” the writer heard her reply, looking very pleased and proud.

After the first short subject, disruptive piano playing was heard coming from upstairs. Feinstein, embarrassed, ran outside and pushed a door buzzer. When he returned, he explained to the reporter that that was Paul Posnak, a great pianist whose studio was one flight up, who was willing to interrupt his practicing if they invited him to the viewings. He loved movies, was a perfect audience, and had seen some of the bills numerous times. Later Posnak enticed everyone, including Feinstein’s parents, up-stairs to hear a piece by Mozart he was planning to play at a concert the following evening. Then they all returned for the final showings. “Miller turned off the lights and started the projector. Gesner looked distressed, and whispered to him, ‘Damn it! Start the movie and then turn the lights off!’ Miller looked contrite!’ But it was safe to say that after that he dimmed them with the slow sure hand of a professional every time. If there was one thing these young men were bent on, it was getting it right.

Many of the early films were, by the very nature of the Forum’s open-house policy, forgettable. But Feinstein’s taste and assuredness developed quickly. Before long he was presenting widely diverse and interesting programs that included documentaries like one on Bessie Smith by Charles Levin, and a double bill of erotic films that showcased one of Jack Smith’s all-time classics, *Flaming Creatures*; and an important retrospective of “underground film” by current leading cinematographers like Ed Emshwiller (*Relativity*), Mike Kuchar (*Sins of the Fleshapoids*), Stan Vanderbeek (*Breath-death*), Stan Brakhage (*Anticipation of the Night*), Willard Maas (*Geography of the Body*), Storm deHirsch (*Peyote Queen*) and Andy Warhol (*My Hustler*). The bread and cheese never became a reality, but the coffee and talk continued to flow, with new voices added all the time.

One summer night in 1971, a young woman named Karen Cooper visited the Forum for the first time, to view a program of films by Maya Deren, an important independent filmmaker in the 1950s and 1960s. She was interested in one film especially called *Choreography for the Camera* because of her life-long love of dance (encouraged by her mother, the former Ruth Handelsman, “a secretary in whom the soul of Isadora Duncan was trapped”).

Being a perfectionist by nature, however, she realized she lacked the extraordinary talent needed for a successful professional career in dance, and turned to journalism after graduation from Smith College in 1970. At the moment she was writing a column on independent film for the magazine *Filmmakers Newsletter*, and subsequently visited the Film Forum on a regular basis, getting to know Peter Feinstein, who by now was running operations more or less single-handedly.

In the spring of 1972, he told her he was planning to accept a job in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and asked her if she wanted to take over the business. Momentarily stunned, she said she’d have to think about it, and went home to wrestle a decision. Her concern was her complete lack of experience, not only in running a film theater, but any kind of business (balancing her checkbook each month was as close as she’d come, and that hadn’t been totally successful). She slept on it and the next morning resolved to do it. “Who else would give me my own business?” she told New York Times reporter Lawrence Van Gelder in a July 18, 1982, interview. The opportunity was too irresistible. So was the challenge.

On April 16, 1973, Cooper sent us her first letter, a three-page account of her take-over and plans that clearly showed she had an aptitude for running a business after all, and an intelligent, thoughtful approach to improving it:

“I would like to introduce myself. Since last spring I have been involved with the Film Forum’s activities.

Beginning in September 1972 I officially took over Peter Feinstein's position as director of the Forum. Peter has maintained a vital interest in the Forum as a consultant and sounding board for new ideas and programs that have developed over the last eight months (...since September 1972, he has been executive secretary of the University Film Study Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, an organization which serves the needs of the New England colleges' film departments).

"[Your] Foundation has played a dynamic role in the continuing success and expansion of the Forum's activities. For this I am tremendously indebted to both your foresight and generosity. In a larger sense, the international film community of independent filmmakers is also indebted to you. But even more important than the artists themselves or the organization that brings their work to the public are the film-goers themselves. This year the Film Forum will have shown twenty-one different programs...to over six-thousand people. The size and scope of our audience has grown tremendously over the last three seasons...We have managed to maintain our community orientation as well, making the theater space and screening facilities available free of charge or at nominal cost to local block associations, women's groups, political meetings, video work-shops...

"Naturally under a new director, the Forum has developed in directions which are particularly of my making. I would like to describe some of the changes that have taken place this season... in the spring of 1972 Peter Feinstein and I made tentative plans for my taking over his position in the fall. In light of these events, I traveled to the Cannes Film Festival at my own expense in May 1972 to look for new, unusual foreign films for the Forum.

"In September, 1972, Peter moved to Massachusetts. At his suggestion I hired Steve Dobi, a young lecturer in the Speech and Film Department of City College and a filmmaker in his own right. During the week the two of us are constantly engaged in looking at films for possible programming, which means we can sometimes look at twenty to thirty hours of films before coming up with a suitable one-and-one-half-hour evening.

"One major change I have made in the Forum policy is to maximize the amount of publicity given each program. A detailed, critical press release is sent to approximately eighty newspapers and magazines for each show and also to Perry Miller at N.E.T. Mrs. Miller programs films of this nature for nationwide television broadcast, and to date two of our shows have been chosen for broadcast. This means extra monies for the filmmaker and wide coverage, something this type of film rarely receives."

She also instituted a policy of providing program notes for audiences, plus keeping up a constant correspondence with publications that printed film schedules free of charge, such as *Cue*, *Newsday*, and *The Village Voice*. She developed a new logo as well—for stationery, posters, and programs—to make the name easily recognizable.

But what Karen Cooper found she had that was most important of all was an almost unerring sense of what were important films, and through her own innate taste she was able to keep up Feinstein's original high standards and expand his scope to include foreign films, features, and shorts based on particular themes. For someone who, prior to covering them for the *Filmmakers Newsletter* as part for a journalistic career, admitted that her interest in and attendance at movies were "no more, no less" than anybody else's, she even surprised herself at how fully she had thrown herself into the project—and succeeded. Her letter continued:

"Quite frankly, the Film Forum simply would not have existed these past three years without the generous support [of your Foundation]..." and went on to list the other (then) meager sources of funding which included the New York State Council on the Arts, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the Exxon Corporation. The theater, being three years old then, needed "sprucing up. A fresh coat of paint and a new carpet on the floor should make the place a good deal more attractive," and so out went the infinite firmament, to be replaced by a no-nonsense grey-on-grey environment that demonstrated the new director's serious, practical approach, (which continued through three subsequent moves to bigger and better quarters and an eventual

operating budget in excess of two million).

The twenty-three old Karen Cooper I first encountered in 1972 was as serious and intent a young woman as her goals. From her correspondence, I somehow envisioned a very tall, imposing dynamo, and instead found a petite, dark-eyed waif with shoulder-length hair pulled back in a pony tail, still looking like a college student in jeans and a blue workman's shirt, over which was pulled a short-sleeved T-shirt like a sweater, emblazoned with a currently popular environmental slogan.

Her face had a certain sad/vulnerable quality that brought to mind a cross between the actress Julie Harris and the French singer Edith Piaf. Although her eyes expressed volumes and her demeanor was very personable, her infrequent smile was little more than a slight upward lift of the corners of her mouth (prompting a paraphrase of the old Dorothy Parker line about running the gamut of emotion from A to B in describing a performance by Katharine Hepburn).

Another innovation she introduced was inviting me to attend press screenings of new film, which meant my being able to attend morning sessions at Film Forum and still book theater events the same evenings. It also gave me an inkling of how movie critics reacted before getting to their typewriters. Best of all, it showed they were only human and also occasionally succumbed to the coziness of the warm dark place; some with the biggest names from the biggest publications, could be spotted nodding off during the slow stretches, with heavy snorts cracking the still air like whips.

One critic, Roger Greenspun of *The New York Times* was the first champion of the Film Forum, and reviewed much of the early work shown there. Karen attributed his abiding interest to helping make it a "household name" by the mid 1970s. On September 30, 1972, following his article on her first major presentation—*Asylum*, shot by Peter Robinson inside the noted British psychiatrist, R.D. Laing's therapeutic community in London, which he reviewed favorably—he added this post script:

"'Asylum' opened yesterday at Film Forum, an unusual and very valuable little Upper West Side theater that shows its movies only on weekends."

On the strength of that note alone, attendance began to soar, and Cooper was wise enough to present provocative follow-up programs that would make people want to return for more. What they saw in the succeeding months of her first year at the helm was a mixed bag of unfamiliar goodies, beginning with the twenty-six year old Werner Schroeter's *The Death of Maria Malibran*, a story of a nineteenth century opera star who died at the age of twenty-eight onstage from over-exertion. Greenspun placed it somewhere between the sensibilities of Oscar Wilde and Andy Warhol.

It was also the beginning of Cooper's love affair with the new German film movement. She introduced local viewers to its "Big Three" cinematographers—Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, and Wim Wenders. *Even Dwarfs Started Small* by Herzog, was presented at the October 24, 1972, press screening just after that of *Maria Malibran* ("Bring lunch," she warned in the press release) and the combination made for a weird, surreal matinée of grotesque imagery, what with Schroeter's cast of wildly made-up women and transvestites (Candy Darling was the star) posing and vamping in black voids or formal sickly green gardens, forests, and cemeteries, emphasizing lesbianism, decadence and death; and Herzog's real dwarfs burning flowers, crucifying a monkey, and playing with their food in a repressive institution, proving to be as inhumane as their exploiters in a metaphor for the uprisings of any repressed people. Needless to say, none of the critics (nor I) dozed that day, in spite of the length of the program. (Fassbinder's *Beware the Holy Whore* was shown in 1976, and Wender's *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* in 1977.)

Karen Cooper continued her interest in dance cinema by presenting an evening of experimental short films where the choreography was designed specifically for the camera, instead of just being dutifully recorded from a stage performance. She called it "Cine-Dance," and it included work by Fred Aronow, Doris Chase, Bob Cowan, Grover Dale, Jill Demby, Nancy Kendall, and Hillary Harris.

That was followed soon after by *Hippodrome Hardware*, a forty-five minute human action and animation film by the sculptor/artist Red Grooms, that proved to be the refreshingly innovative pop-art romp that one had learned to expect from that madcap caricaturist. Relatively mindless (meaning one didn't have to give much thought to plot or meaning, just sit back and let the images wash across the eyes), it included a shooting star that rode a bicycle, a purple cow, a man living on an iceberg, a couple of carpenters carrying tools as large as they were, and a foldout ruler that moved with anthropomorphic versatility; a large-as-a-person robin portrayed by a human woman (Groom's wife Mimi) with feathers stuck to her chest, a ten-foot Goddess of Carpentry who tossed flowers at the audience, and a gawky clown called Ruckus, played by Grooms himself. (Ruckus would reappear in the huge 1978 work-of-art construction celebrating the gritty and chaotic side of New York City by the Grooms, called "Ruckus Manhattan," that filled the entire street-floor level of a Wall street area office building for many months; a movie of the same name was shot showing the evolution of it from the earliest sketches to the finishing touches of such landmarks as the Brooklyn Bridge and the Woolworth Building, all appropriately askew, and the erection of the piece-de-resistance, a gross Statue of Liberty smoking a long cigarette and wearing glittering red pumps. The film successfully recaptured the witty and energetic confusions of street life of the original—from Times Square peep shows to alligator-filled sewers to graffitied subways—that was the most talked-of "Happening" of the time, and attracted many thousands of visitors.)

Hippodrome Hardware was accompanied by other assorted experiments in animation by Lowell Bodger, Doris Chase, Al Jamow, and one called One Man's Laundry, written by Fred Aronow and drawn and animated by George Griffin, who became Karen Cooper's husband.

On the heels of all this, within the first six months after the Film Forum reopened, were new works by the Kuchar brothers, George and Mike, (who had left their native Bronx for California and were both teaching film making at the San Francisco Art Institute), several documentaries by the contemporary master Stan Brakhage, a retrospective of Ed Emshwiller work, spanning twelve years, and films on such diverse subjects as Anthropology, Sci-Fi, tributes to famous icons like Marilyn Monroe, and documentaries on the lives of living artists like Claes Oldenburg, the wrap-around sculptor Christo, and the Dutch surrealist Frans Zwartjes.

With programs as diverse as these, Karen saw her step-child growing out of its baby shoes, and felt the need to expand the facilities. By the next fall, most screenings were selling out in advance, leaving increasingly more patrons disappointed, and Karen frustrated at losing income from the successful ones. She began looking for new quarters and found them in 1975 at the old Vandam Theater at 15 Vandam Street, seven or eight blocks south of my studio and next door to Soho. Originally an Off Off Broadway playhouse, the two-hundred seat Vandam could only accommodate 16mm film presentation, like the 88th Street location, and wasn't really built for movie projection. But despite all that, the Film Forum prospered and presented some of its greatest successes there, including the Wender and Fassbinder films mentioned earlier and the documentary *Battle of Chile*, as well as Syberberg's *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*. Screenings continued to be one nightly, four times a week, ten months of the year.

By 1980, the Forum had outgrown the Vandam space as well, and plans were laid to construct a new twin cinema theater, with accommodations for both thirty-five and sixteen millimeter projection, to be built at 57 Watts Street further south on the West Side. Watts was one of the main arteries leading to the west-bound entrance of the Holland Tunnel, and later prompted Cooper to quip, "You could call us the last movie before New Jersey."

Things got serious after the Ford Foundation awarded the Film Forum a \$400,000 low-interest loan for the construction of the new facility, and invitations were sent out to a cocktail fund-raiser at the Century Club on West Forty-third Street to be held on Thursday, December 11, 1980, from 5:00-7:00 P.M. The lure was the appearance of movie star Robert Redford as guest speaker. I had no intention of missing it, and it was one of the few times Arthur agreed to accompany me without coaxing.

One morning, about a week before the scheduled event, my phone rang. When I picked it up, a pleasant young man's voice on the other end said, "Mr. Russell? This is Robert Redford's secretary calling from Los Angeles..."

I thought it was some kind of joke. I'd told friends about the invitation, and thought one of them was pulling my leg. I gave a flip reply, which prompted a pause, and then the voice resumed, more politely than before, "Mr. Russell, this really is Robert Redford's secretary, sir, and I am calling from Mr. Redford's office in Los Angeles. You are to be among the guests at the reception at the Century Club next week, and Mr. Redford asked me to call and ask if you could make it on the 18th instead of the 11th, at the same time and place. He is tied up here in a court case and can't get away before then. We're sorry for the inconvenience, but hope you will still be able to attend. We're looking forward to meeting you."

I had turned purple with embarrassment and stammered something like, "Of course I understand and I'll be happy to attend. Sorry about being a bit snide back there, but I thought it was a friend playing a joke."

Voice laid back and smooth as silk, he said that was all right—no offense, and that made me feel even more of a boob. I thanked him for calling and when I hung up, grabbed the coffee cup I'd parked when the phone rang, and paced the room carrying on a fantasy conversation with Robert Redford for five minutes or so.

It turned out that Redford had contacted all sixty or seventy guests invited to the affair, and many of them remarked about how considerate it was of him, when we gathered at the rather stuffy, pompous Club a week later.

The reception room was buzzing when we arrived, and Redford was already there, along with the impressive group of committee members for the affair:

Nancy Boggs, Chairman of the Board
Ford Foundation

Roger Larson
Young Filmmakers/Video Arts

Mary Schmidt Campbell
Studio Museum of Harlem

Robert A. Rosen
Rosen Associates

Jill Fairchild

Frank A Shephard
Lehman Brothers Kuhn Loeb, Inc.

Henry M Hocherman, Esq.
Shereff, Feiedman, Hoffman & Goodman

Barbara M. Van Dyke
International Film Seminars

Celeste Holm

George C. White
Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

John M. Irwin
Exxon Corporation

Everyone did the same thing Arthur and I did when we entered—looked first for the star. He was at one end of the room beside a model of the proposed new Film Forum structure with Karen Cooper and the architects, Stephen Tilly, and Leslie Armstrong. Karen surprised me as much as anybody. I hadn't seen her for a few years, and in that time the kid in jeans and outsized T-shirts had developed into an attractive, sophisticated New York executive. Dressed in a black velvet jumper dress over a full-sleeved silken blouse, with gold beads peeking out from under the collar and hair sleekly drawn back into a circular bun, she was deftly pointing out features of the new building to the guest of honor.

The first impression I got on seeing Redford was how thin he looked. Gaunt, really. But there was no mistaking that facial structure and tousled blond hair that made him instantly recognizable in Coming Attraction posters outside movie houses around the world. The second thing I noticed was he was the only man there without a tie. Casually dressed in grey flannel slacks, a beautiful camel-hair sports jacket (felt like butter, Arthur admitted later—he couldn't resist touching it from behind as I was having my five-minute

conversation with him), an open blue oxford shirt under a Norwegian-design sleeveless sweater, and a dark brown scarf draped around his neck, he was listening intently to Karen's explanations, trying to blend as inconspicuously as possible into the crowd—not easy for someone named Robert Redford. Just as at the party years before in the Hamptons for Cary Grant, everyone studiously pretended to ignore the celebrity only to find themselves looking back or sideways periodically to catch what he did or said next. Eyes had a way of following him around the room without a turn of the head or a pause in conversation.

Cooper introduced me to him as the Ghost of Christmas Past, and we smiled at each other as she described the unique nature of our foundation and its emphasis on seminal aid to young talent starting out. God, he's good looking, I thought. With a face like that he was destined to be famous; those penetrating blue eyes and those cheekbones ate up film footage in my mind. I learned later he believed his fame derived initially from



Century Club 12/18/80, l-r: Mrs., Mr. Barry Gberman, Ford Foundation; Karen Cooper, Film Forum; Robert Redford; Stephen Tilly, Leslie Armstrong, architects

luck and looks first, talent second, and he was sensitive about it. The assumption was not entirely unfounded. William Goldman, the script writer for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, a 1969 film co-starring Paul Newman that made Redford a star, related an overheard conversation between two studio execs after Redford had been chosen for the role: one who was against the choice (it had been written for Jack Lemon) said to the other that Redford was just “another California blond—throw a stick at Malibu and you’ll hit six of him.” (From *Adventures in the Screen Trade* by William Goldman.)

Redford and I found we had two things in common as we talked: we were both visual artists first, and had studied at Pratt Institute. Born Charles Robert Redford in 1937, he was the son of a Los Angeles accountant, and had no early desire to act at all. He attended the University of Colorado on a baseball scholarship for awhile, but grew restless and quit to become a vagabond artist, painting and sketching around Europe for a year or so. At twenty, he returned to the States with the ambition of being a stage scenic designer, and enrolled in the Art School at Pratt. Feeling the necessity for more practical experience in the field, however, he

transferred after a year to the Academy of Dramatic Arts to concentrate exclusively on stage design.

But looks like his couldn't be hid under a tarpaulin for long, especially at one of the country's leading drama schools where talent scouts hovered about the corridors like summer flies. He tried acting and found it came naturally to him and enjoyed it. Upon graduation he got his first taste of fame when he was chosen to be in the Broadway production of Neil Simon's *BAREFOOT IN THE PARK* in 1963 (he was to appear later in the film version also in 1967).

Redford acted in a few television series, like *Hitchcock Presents*, *Perry Mason*, and *Route 66*, before returning to California to break into movies. He was not an overnight success. His first film, *War Hunt* (1962) went almost unnoticed. Then, back on Broadway, he landed the part in *BAREFOOT IN THE PARK*, and more attention was paid when he did the movie version. It was on the strength of that that he won the role that made him famous, the Sundance Kid in 1969. In all of his films from the very first, he received star billing (great agent!). But he was shrewdly aware of his limitations, and wisely chose roles that suited his personality and range, preferring to do characters that were historical or political. Some of his best were: *The Candidate* (1972); *The Sting* (1973)—a kind of sequel to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* that was admittedly made only for money (and it made millions, prompting one Hollywood harpie to note that the blonder they made him, the more successful the pictures were at the box office); *All the President's Men* (1976); *A Bridge Too Far* (1977); and *Out of Africa* (1985). He was so hot in Hollywood by 1977 that during the filming of *A Bridge Too Far*, his overage fee (the amount paid for each extra day of shooting beyond the schedule) was \$125,000 per day!

Ironically, the only Oscar he won during all that time was for his direction of the 1980 Best Picture, *Ordinary People*, and it showed a restless spirit who was not content simply being a "movie celebrity." He became active in conservative and liberal politics about the same time, and decided to make good on a dream he had to set up a center for young filmmakers, where they could live and work free of charge for a period of time, unhampered by any concerns other than artistic. He called it, naturally enough, Sundance Institute, and built it in the mountains of Utah near where he lived, at Park City. Eventually an annual Sundance Film Festival was held there, and it became the American Cannes for experimental cinema.

One of the reasons he agreed to participate in the Film Forum event was so that he could introduce his Sundance plan to New York culture mavins who might be sympathetic to his project as well. Many were. Eventually Sundance had an annual Budget (in 1986) of \$625,000, and even turned a few young filmmakers into overnight celebrities; like Steven Soderbergh, who, in 1989, was driving a van for hire around Park City one day, and the next, after a screening of his extraordinary piece, "sex, lies, and videotapes"—and a follow-up rave review in *Variety*—was the darling of Hollywood with every director and film executive demanding his services, including Sydney Pollock and Redford himself. (The film later won Best Film Award at Cannes.)

Like so many other high-placed film personalities who, as they became more famous, grew more reclusive and unapproachable, Redford, too, developed his own complex security system to afford him and his family privacy, especially when they were in residence in Utah. William Goldman complained that, when he was working with him on the script of *All the President's Men*, he had to call a number in another town, and the person there would relay it to Redford, who would then return the call. For Goldman, who had known Redford for many years—their wives had lunched and kids played with each other—it was an affront he felt deeply. He and his family were never invited to the hide-away in Utah. (Contrary to public assumption, Redford considered himself a New Yorker, and spent far more of his life in Manhattan than Hollywood.) To us that rainy afternoon on Forty-third Street in New York, however, Redford was accessible, gracious and considerate. Referring back to my introduction as the Ghost of Christmas Past, he said he was heartened to see that ghosts these days had more substance than they used to. As he turned away to greet another guest Cooper had lined up, I was aware for the first time that he was my height—I had heard he was short (or was that Alan Ladd?)—and that the back of his neck was furrowed with the same network of creases cowboys develop after years of exposure to the sun out on the range. It reduced the tinsel town Titan to human scale

(like the time, during a Broadway show's intermission, when the Duchess of Windsor passed in front of me in the lobby on the arm of Russell Nype; they paused to greet someone, turning away from me, and I noticed the silver brocade jacket she wore over a long black skirt was worn through at the elbow of the arm locked in his—it colored everything I read or saw of her later.)

In 1981 the new Film Forum theater was finished. It contained two cinemas—for 35mm and 16m projection—and operated seven days a week, three-hundred-sixty-five days a year. During the first several years the second screen room was occupied by a renter, which provided revenue to help pay off the Ford Foundation loan. But in 1987, Cooper was able to take over that space again, and Bruce Goldstein was put in charge of programming and publicizing it.

In 1989, the Watts Street complex was lost to a real estate developer and demolished, and the Film Forum went out of operation for a year. But not out of existence. Karen Cooper embarked on a \$3.2 million capital building campaign, and raised it from a combination of foundation and corporate grants, major gifts from individuals, loans and over two-thousand smaller donations.

The new Forum was located at 209 West Houston Street, just a few blocks north of its old location, in lower Greenwich Village. It had three theaters, with 142, 149, and 180 seats respectively, each equipped for 35mm and 16mm projection. It opened in 1990, continuing its first-run and repertory programming, and adding the ability (through the third theater) to move over popular films for expanded runs. By then it had an operating budget in excess of \$2 million. After it reopened, Film Forum (IV) premiered such American independent documentaries as *Berkeley in the Sixties* and *Paris is Burning*, as well as Ousmane Sembene's *Camp at Thiaroye* and Jiri Menzel's *Larks of Spring*. Milestones in black film making, a Preston Sturges retrospective, a salute to Billy Wilder, and the re-release of Orson Welles' classic, *Citizen Kane* on its fiftieth anniversary, were all celebrated. Special presentations included the uncut version of Bertolucci's 1990, *Kiss Me Kate* in the original 3-D version, and an ongoing animated Japanese fantasy, *Akira*.

It was clear Karen Cooper never reneged on her early pledge to offer the widest possible variety of the best avant-garde films being made. She was even able, eventually, to escape Dr. Harry Lerner's en-C.I.R.C.L.E.-ment without the heavy pay-off the Circle Rep was charged (by winning her own tax-exempt status from the IRS under The Moving Image, Inc.), but not totally without incident. Lerner had always kept a small percentage of grant money slated for the Forum, but one time he held back more than she deemed conscionable. She said nothing, but never forgot it. Years later he called for free tickets to one of the shows, and Karen informed him that if he paid the Film Forum the money he owed it, she'd be happy to give them to him. "Needless to say, I never heard from the creep again."

She told Lawrence Van Gelder in a 1982 interview that she thought of the Forum as a tripod—with one foot in show biz, one in art biz, and one in education biz. But vowed that her real concern was and would continue to be that of introducing new films to the general public. She then traced a typical work week schedule: running the theaters week days, with occasional forays to the more important film festivals around the world, like Cannes and Berlin, to check out the current market. All day Saturday and Sunday was spent looking at new offerings—"I tend to stockpile them and have a blitz... It's an ongoing scavenger hunt." When asked facetiously what she did in her spare time, she revealed how near to an obsession her adopted vocation had become:

"Strangely enough, I go to the movies."

Karen Cooper's success, and that of the Film Forum, could be measured in small but significant ways also. Remember that symbol of hospitality and fellowship, the trusty fifty-copper from Restaurant Supply that dispensed hot coffee to lubricate post-show rap sessions in the early days? Well, by the time the spanking new lobby at West Houston Street opened, it had graduated to a full-fledged espresso bar concession, offering, like the three theaters beyond, a far greater variety of accompanying attractions than just oatmeal cookies. In fact, one could order a substantial evening snack to go with a choice of exotic coffees, and eat it off the green

serpentine counter that wiggled down the center of the room like easy lightning. A typical order from the bar was that of the guy ahead of me in line before a late afternoon showing:

“One cappuccino
One espresso
Lemon peel no sugar
Right
And ah-h-h-h-h-h-h
A coupla pieces of—
Is that banana walnut?
Oh, cranberry raisin
That’s more expensive
Well, okay
One of those then
Yeah
And two forks
Ri-i-i-i-ight

For the enlightened cognoscenti, Cooper devised her own amusing conceit—fresh flowers in a vase at the box office window signaled freshly baked goodies inside.

Chapter Eight

East Side, West Side (1970-1975)

Every structure becomes a holistic entity once it's occupied; the whole is always more than the sum of its parts—even a stable. And the more ambitious the architecture's design and intentions, the more that is expected of it. Patrons beginning the ascent up the Grand Staircase of the old Paris Opera know they're in for more than just another performance of AIDA. Visitors drawn to the dazzling whiteness of the Taj Mahal delight in finding the exterior of the marble mausoleum virtually covered with the world's most exquisite inlaid graffiti of black linear arabesques entwining delicately tinted birds and flowers_ Taken together, the dramatic spires of the royal "Wats" that punctuate the sky over Bangkok, and the gaudy giants guarding their gates, transcend their theme park construction of cement, plaster, and broken colored glass to metamorphose into hallowed monuments to dead kings, faithfully tended by priests in tangerine robes.

On a less exalted plane, most of the sites where Off Off Broadway companies took up residence turned holistic by default—built originally for other businesses that failed or outgrew them, they only grudgingly became theaters. By 1970, I reckoned that the beckoning finger of the Muse had enticed me into every conceivable type of darkened space in Manhattan in my search for the ultimate theatrical experience; but I reckoned wrongly. About that time, three new companies were formed, each very different, and each appearing in a setting I hadn't yet encountered: one in the grand ballroom of a tipsy waterfront hostelry; another in a 42nd Street strip joint surrounded by explicit porno shops; and the third in a tiny jewel-box carved out of a defunct bank smack in the middle of the skidsiest stretch of the Bowery.

The "grand ballroom" was in the least grand district of northwestern Greenwich Village, where West Street followed the Hudson River waterfront north and south under the elevated West Side Highway. Beige brick remnants of ship terminals lined one side, leading to cavernous long piers enclosed in wood and corrugated tin that were rotting and more than two-thirds abandoned in 1972, their street windows missing glass and entrance doors unlocked and left to the mercy of stiff gusts that whipped up from the bay without warning. The exposed ends of the piers pierced so far into the river that they almost brushed the great ocean liners that plied past and were great places for sunbathing and picnics in good weather, as long as care was taken getting through the disintegrated interiors. Their relative inaccessibility—and the lure of illicit dangers—also made the piers prime cruising areas for gay men after dark, attracting the usual sucker fish: dope pushers, opportunists, "chicken" prostitutes, and, most menacing of all, muggers. It was certainly no place to let your kids play at night.

The elevated highway formed a wide canopy over West Street, under which miles of trailer trucks parked tight against each other out of the elements. Beneath the truck bodies lived a floating vagrant community in cardboard shelters, peeing against the wheels and draping laundry over the headlights. Day and night, female and transvestite hookers struck seductive poses at both ends of the trucks, baring breasts to the corresponding flows of traffic, hoping for cars to slow down and turn into side streets so they could turn tricks under the watchful eyes of pimps hiding in nearby parked Caddies.

Further north, at Gansevoort and Little West Twelfth Streets, stood rows on rows of wholesale butcheries, where great slabs of meat swung on hooks out over the sidewalk each morning waiting to be cut up. Each night, fresh rivulets of blood trickled out over time-darkened cobblestones. The streetlights were far apart, accentuating the area's desolation. Here, more prostitutes directed johns in cars to deeper shadows and less-frenzied dalliances in the wee hours.

Smack in the middle of all this, like the focal point of a Bosch triptych, sat the Jane-West Hotel, indicating the juncture of Jane and West Streets. In the 1980s, after the old elevated highway was torn down and most of the piers demolished, it would command one of the most spectacular panoramic views of New York Harbor

and the distant New Jersey skyline; and it may have been for that reason that it underwent cosmetic surgery and had its name changed to the Riverview Hotel, indicated on a showy brass plate beside the entrance. But in 1972, it was still the sort of place it was probably built for originally in 1907—a haven for merchant seamen off the docked freighters, the turnover from the street, a few permanent dwellers (recognizable by the milk cartons and air plants on the window sills), and occasional black musicians working gigs at jazz joints on Bleeker Street.

It was a sturdy, five-story brick building with narrow windows and a rounded corner construction that became an octagonal turret above the roof, capped by a stone balustrade, lending it the appearance of a medieval fortress. The entrance was up a flight of high steps, past stone pillars and a lintel decorated with anchors, all guarded by a pair of lethal-looking spiked lanterns. After such a bravado introduction, the lobby was a puny disappointment: barely enough space to stand and check in at a caged window to the right with a large NO REFUNDS sign over it on the pea-green wall. A chain link fence ran across the middle of the room with a serious-looking steel door leading upstairs to the rooms. It was always kept locked, and a key to it went with the key to accommodation; it closed automatically with the terrifying clang of a prison gate.

Next to the cage was a less-threatening doorway that led to the Grand Ballroom—an anachronism if there ever was one. It hadn't been occupied for years until recently. The high arched windows were boarded up and the once-elegant sculpted ceiling all but erased by crude repair jobs. It made one wonder what the original builders had in mind for its use: sea dog cotillions? Merchant marine soirées? We'd never know. But lately, it had been put to comparable use as the performing space for an all-male version of Euripides' *THE TROJAN WOMEN*, presented by Ronald Tavel's short-lived Theater of the Lost Continent, and directed by Donald L. Brooks.

It was a decidedly high-camp romp, featuring Jackie Curtis as a lamé-draped Goddess of War; an unidentified tall black man as Helen of Troy, and Mario Montez as Cassandra, played with a Bronx accent as pronounced as his "Neuyorican" get-up of flounces and satin. In the enormous, boisterous cast, glimpses could be had of Harvey Tavel as the chorus leader, Harvey Fierstein as Andromache, and Bill Maloney as Hecuba. Enthusiasm scored over talent in most of the portrayals, and, after a brief flash-in-the-pan publicity-wise, the company sashayed itself out of existence.

The lease was assumed by George Bartenieff and his wife Crystal Field, the co-artistic directors of The Theater for the New City, and the founders, along with Lawrence Kornfeld and Theo Barnes, of the company in December 1970. TNC actually began life in Westbeth, a new artists' housing development on the western edge of the Village made over from a block-through former warehouse of the telephone company, bordering Washington, Bank, Bethune, and West Streets. TNC occupied a three-story building on the Bank Street side, facing an inner courtyard. By a special arrangement with the Kaplan Fund and the Westbeth Corporation, who were anxious to add a resident theater group on the premises to round out a preplanned cultural complex, the founders were offered the space rent-free for the first eighteen months, with the understanding that they renovate it themselves and begin paying after the year and a half were up.

One of the founding concepts of TNC was to generate a dialogue between the theater and its immediate community, and that was soon accomplished. It presented the first of what would become a staple element of its repertoire—street plays. Titled *MINDING THE STORE*, it was a musical by Robert Nichols and directed by Crystal Field, intended for all ages: a "children's grownup show," as the composer called it. Performed outdoors in the adjoining courtyard in rain or shine (mostly it drizzled), it was a broad slapstick tale of some kids who, while playing store, are confronted by a host of unsavory characters, real or imagined, including a bumbling physician, slippery politicians, and self-righteous clergymen, all acting and reacting in exuberant song.

Inside the Westbeth theater, in an upstairs loft, another musical, *THE JOURNEY*, was generating its own excitement from neighborhood viewers. Written by Bill Russell, with music by Michael Collin, it was a retelling of the Biblical story of Abraham, featuring six overworked actors in myriad roles and a stage full of

grounded grey and white balloons representing sheep. In the following eighteen months, resident productions included DRACULA: SABAT by Leon Katz, KEEPERS OF HIPPO HORN by Florence Miller, PROSPERAL RISING by Rod Farber, and PRAEXIS by Theo Barnes.

The Theater for the New City presented productions in the spring of 1972 of two very different, but equally original and important, new companies whose directors would go on to make outstanding contributions to Off Off Broadway.

The first was Richard Foreman and his Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, with EVIDENCE: BEING THE ADDITIONAL MATERIALS FROM THE NOTEBOOKS IN WHICH LINES OF VISION AND HOTEL CHINA, PARTS ONE AND TWO WERE ORIGINALLY HANDWRITTEN. (Subsequent titles would be equally wordy and bewildering, like BLVD. DE PARIS (I'VE GOT THE SHAKES) OR TORTURE ON A TRAIN (BRAIN-MECHANISMS OF THE REDISTRIBUTED FRENCH VIRGIN) OR CERTAINLY NOT (A TORTUOUS TRAIN OF THOUGHT)—all one title!) Foreman had founded his theater group in 1968 to produce his own hermetic, disassociatively styled texts, as much in protest of what was being done by others around him, both in conventional and experimental modes, as anything else.

He was inspired by the work of such avant-garde film makers as his mentor and champion, Jonas Mekas of Film Archives, who, during the first four years allowed Foreman free rehearsal space and encouraged his colleagues to be Ontological-Hysteric's earliest audiences. Mekas wrote of it, '(It) has tried to be a theater not of emotions, not of ideas, but a representation of the efforts, effects, strategies, and inventions of whatever it is in us, and through us, that does 'thinking.'

Foreman's company continued in one form or another through the 1980s, but his methods of production remained the same: using a core of non-actor performers who were creative in other fields, with each element of the works tightly controlled by him as "director-orchestrator-designer." His distinctive stage set designs were as cluttered as a great-aunt's attic and always featured trademark lengths of black-and-white marked string stretched tightly overhead, defining only he knew what chambers of the mind.

His work was definitely an acquired taste, one I had to admit most of the time was too cerebral for my limited comprehension. But I kept tabs on his development through the years. Disenchanted with New York at one point, he went to live in France and became the darling of Paris intelligentsia for a while. On returning, he presented plays in a loft at 491 Broadway at Broome Street in Soho, then at the Public Theater, and, in the early 1990s, in a second-floor space at St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery. His most accessible pieces were collaborations with Stanley Silverman for the Music-Theatre Performing Group/Lenox Arts Center (later Music-Theatre Group) at St. Clement's from 1978 onward. They included DREAM TANTRAS OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS, DR. SELAVY'S MAGIC THEATRE, HOTEL FOR CRIMINALS, and THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION. In the late 1970s, we helped sponsor several of his plays in the so-called "Rhoda in Potatoland" series, which were filled with wry good humor.

The other theater group that the Theater for the New City introduced in its last days at Westbeth was the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, directed by and starring Charles Ludlam, the Clown Prince of Off Broadway. Its offering was a rare gem called EUNUCHS OF THE FORBIDDEN CITY, with Ludlam as the Number One Eunuch, Anti Hai, in a Chinese royal court full of zanies played by Ridiculous Theatrical's regulars, led by the indefatigable duo introduced in Chapter One with Mabou Mines' production of LEAR: Lola Pashalinski as one tottering empress, Tsu An, and Black-eyed Susan as another, Tsu Hsi (affectionately called "Toots" in the play). Based very, very loosely on the tale of an actual dowager empress who lived from 1834 to 1908, and, after humble beginnings as a concubine, rose to supremacy through many devious tricks, killing her son and heir in the process, and fomenting the Boxer Rebellion. It was a farcical send-up, mixing old movie scenarios, history, fables, and debris of past and current society. Ludlam once announced, describing his company, 'We are recycling culture,' and in this one, he had all the trash bins lined up and labeled.

Charles Ludlam formed the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in 1967 after he'd been fired from a produc-

tion of *CONQUEST OF THE UNIVERSE*, which he wrote and was starring in at the time. John Vaccaro, his erstwhile friend and collaborator, directed the work and did the throwing out. Their rift split the company apart; some of the members left with Ludlam to form the new group, whose name was an intended travesty of the original, *The Theater of the Ridiculous*, which Vaccaro continued to direct. Ludlam wrote another version of the play, called it *WHEN QUEENS COLLIDE*, and debuted it at the Gate Theatre on Second Avenue.

In quick succession, presentations of *BIG HOTEL* and Bill Vehr's *WHORES OF BABYLON* followed, then *TURDS IN HELL*, which became so popular it transferred to the Masque Theatre on Forty-second Street for an extended run. After another hit, *GRAND TAROT*, Ludlam presented *BLUEBEARD*, an extravaganza that was to become one of his best meal tickets: it ran for a while at La MaMa in the spring of 1970, moved to Christopher's End, a bar on Christopher Street, then to the Performing Garage on Wooster Street, and finally ended up at the Gotham Art Theatre on West Forty-third Street.

For such a specialized form of theater, the Ridiculous Theatrical Company was already gaining a surprising number of admirers who had discovered that men playing women onstage could be stirring as well as silly; comic as well as campy. Ludlam's aim from the very outset was to make audiences aware that he was a man playing female parts—that's why he never shaved his chest hair when he donned low-cut gowns and often removed elaborate wigs while in character to reveal his (real) shiny bald plate. He went to great lengths to define the difference between a transvestite, who tried to conceal his gender, and an actor who, without losing his identity, could create the illusion of specific female roles.

In 1971, Ludlam gained further recognition with a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts and a Guggenheim Fellowship. That fall, he took the company on its first tour of Europe, which, according to some sources, degenerated into the same kind of chaotic farce as most of its productions. After *EUNUCHS* at the Theater for the New City; the Ridiculous presented *CORN*, a country-western with words and music by Virgil Young, at the 13th Street Playhouse in 1972; *DER RING GOTT FARBLONJET*, an opera spoof of Wagner by Jim McElwaine, at the Truck and Warehouse Theater in 1977; *SECRET LIVES OF THE SEXISTS* at the Sheridan Square Playhouse in 1977, which was to become the company's permanent home; and on into the 1980s with such instant classics as *GALAS*, a take-off on the life of opera diva Maria Callas, and probably Ludlam's finest and best loved work, *CAMILLE*, starring himself as the consumptive heroine. He was such a special personality to and of the Off Off Broadway theatrical community, that when he died of AIDS in 1987, the little lane in front of his playhouse was officially named for him in loving, laughing memory.

After presenting the pieces by Foreman and Ludlam, and another by Village Voice drama critic Arthur Sainer, titled *THE CELEBRATION: JOOZ/GUNS/ MOVIES-THE ABYSS*, billed as the complete history of the Jews from the time of Abraham to modern Lower-East-Side New York, the Theater for the New City gained more press coverage and public response than it had since its founding. But it was time for the company's directors to approach the Westbeth Corporation again about a new lease. A rent offer was made, but another theater company outbid them, and TNC was told it had to vacate. Coincidentally, disgruntled tenants of the project were picketing the Corporation out on the sidewalks protesting an announced rent increase for the middle-income artists who made up the majority, claiming it had been designed for their modest lifestyle and was already, in this short time, becoming unaffordable for most of them. As a parting shot at Westbeth Corporation, and as an act of sympathy for the picketers, TNC, for its last appearance at the Bank Street venue, presented *CO-OP*, a "Social Situation Comedy" by Barbara Garson (*MACBIRD*) and Fred Gardner, about—what else?—a tenant committee's fight against an apartment house going co-op!

George Bartenieff and Crystal Field were now in control of TNC as its co-artistic directors, and they wasted no time packing up and moving to the new ballroom quarters in mid-summer 1972. Along with them went the impressive group of sponsors they accumulated, including Al Carmines, Harold Clurman, Elaine DeKoonig, Jean Erdman, Paul Goodman, Elia Kazan, Joseph Papp, Ellen Stewart, and Robert Whitehead. With a twelve-thousand-dollar-per-year rent bill facing them, they quickly worked out a schedule of activi-

ties that included not only new plays by new playwrights, but readings, musical concerts, poetry evenings, and workshop classes (Bartenieff taught Verse Drama). There was even a rummage sale of books, clothing, antiques, memorabilia, etc. planned, with a late night slide show by Jack Smith, of shots taken during the course of the move from Westbeth. All the old casts and crews pitched in to help, but it was Bartenieff and Field who really made everything tick. Bartenieff and Field! Sounded like an old time vaudeville song-and-dance team, and that wasn't far off the mark. They were both theater folk in the old tradition (he even came from a family of performers). Eternally optimistic, buoyant as corks, they were indefatigable troupers whose enthusiasm spilled out onto everyone around them. They gave their all to everything they undertook—from sidewalk rarees to Samuel Beckett, from highfalutin' poetry readings to slapstick party improvisations. They were amusing characters and never more so than when consciously trying to add a touch of class to their act—like Crystal laying on a slightly hoity accent when discussing company business (it got hoitier as the details got more involved), or George affecting the air of a dapper entrepreneur of the arts by always appearing in a shirt, tie, and jacket in public, even though some of the sartorial combinations were, at best, haphazard, and most of the public events were decidedly informal. But everybody loved them. They were affectionately introduced at Obie Award ceremonies as the Lunt and Fontanne of Off Off Broadway (referring to Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, who reigned supreme as the most sophisticated acting couple on Broadway a generation or two earlier), which drew laughs and a big round of applause.

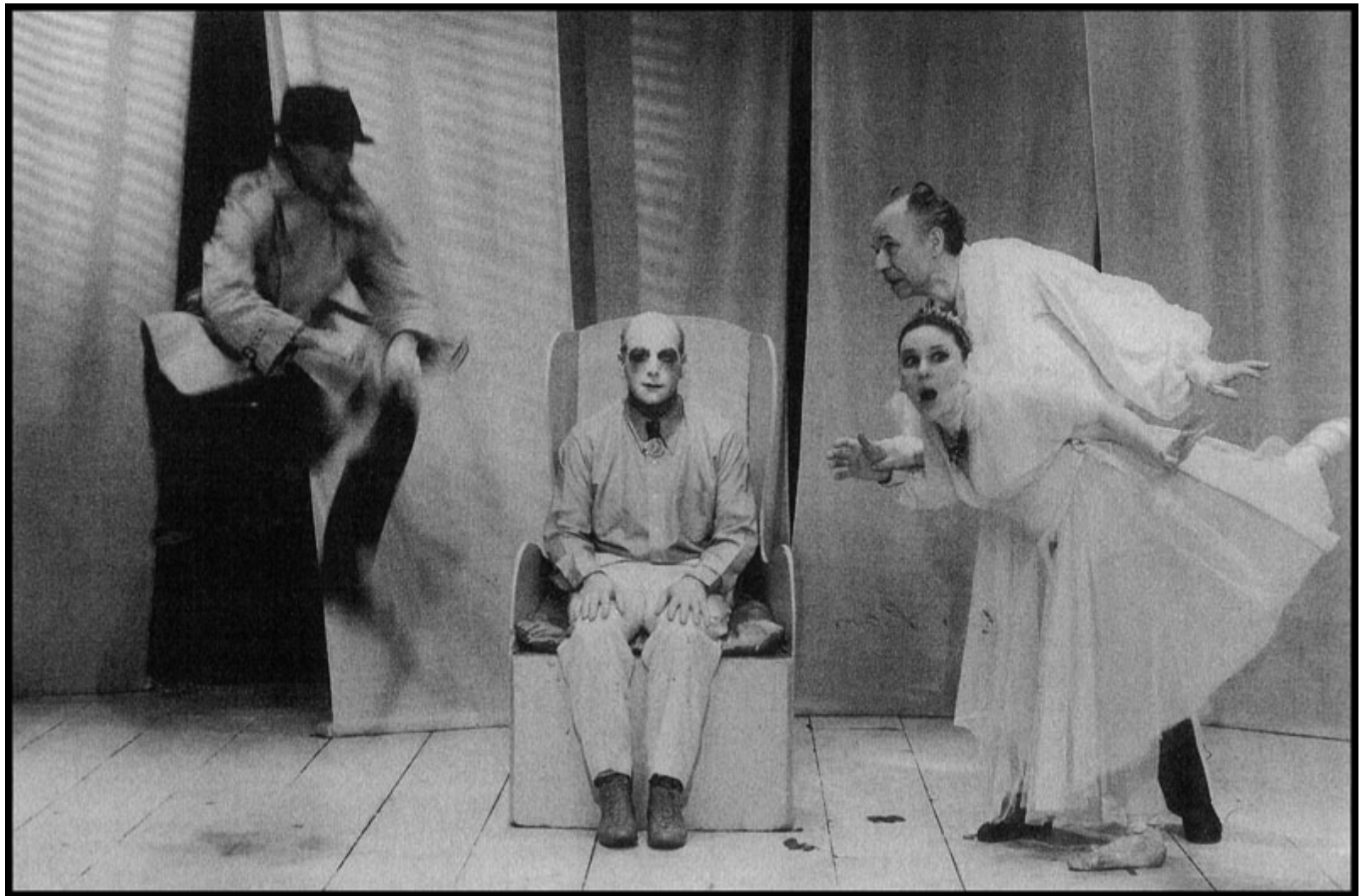
Seeing them in action reminded me of the Vardos, a trio of professional accordionists in the 1940s and 1950s who played what was left of the Keith circuit and one-night stands wherever they could get them. There were Mr. and Mrs. Vardo and their son, Walter, who briefly attended junior high school in my brother's class in our home town, and at fourteen could already play rings around his parents. They appeared out of nowhere one day and bought a tiny cottage with blue shingles and white trim on Main Street. Whenever we passed it later in the car, my mother would say, "I hate blue houses. They're too depressing." But I think what she really disliked, probably without knowing quite why, was the idea of people like the Vardos living there.

Most of the year, they were on the road; yet they always returned to Medway in time to attend Easter service at the Community Church. The three of them were about the same size—short and stocky—and had a distinctive duck walk. But it was Mrs. Vardo we watched out of the corners of our eyes when they waddled down the side aisle to their seats. She was a dead ringer for Mae West, flared nostrils and all, and kept her wide, dazzling, show-stopping smile in place even during the prayers. Her clothes were tight, expensive, and loud, sometimes with lamé panels and fur at the wrists. Her yellow hair was swept up at the sides in two ocean waves that crashed on the top of her head; a low-slung bun in back was caught up in a net snood the same color as her outfit. Instead of the expected, tasteful new hat for the holidays, she'd wear a large exotic flower pinned behind one ear and pat it occasionally with the reddest fingernails I'd ever seen. The men flanked her in the pew in slightly less flashy sport jackets and bow ties, their darker blond pompadours as shiny as their patent leather shoes. It was before my radio "career," and I was very susceptible, so their arrival each spring was more welcome than Easter eggs, and certainly more relevant than the foil-wrapped pots of white lilies lined up in front of the pulpit.

You could almost hear the buzz in the congregation as neighbors elbowed each other at the sight of them: "Those enter-TAIN-ers are back!" they'd whisper in tones indicating a tolerance level just a cut above that of lepers. Enter-TAIN-ers hadn't yet become the household deities they would when television came into its own, so the Vardos, as attractive as they were and, as everybody said, as nice to talk to as you would want, were never assimilated into the studied drabness of Medway. To the townsfolk, they remained colorful outsiders; to me, they were butterflies in a colony of moths. They had the look, the aura, even the smell of Show Biz about them.

Just so with Bartenieff and Field.

I saw Crystal act for the first time in a Halloween special at the Ballroom, called GOSSAMER WINGS.



TRANSIENTS WELCOME, 1985: John Barilla, Bill Evans, Crystal Field, George Bartenieff

(Until then, she'd directed the other works I'd attended.) It was presented by a group calling itself Zee Angels of Light, whose purpose was to show off the individual talents of its current members. So it was a themeless, seamless mishmash of Greek legend, Buzby Berkeley routines, opera and Broadway war horses that swamped the audience in a blizzard of tulle costumes, feathers, props, and painted torsos. At one point, two scantily-clad males hoisted a cute blonde butterball (Crystal) onto one of the multi-leveled stages. She still wore a tutu from an earlier number, and commenced draping herself in yards of silvery fabric, exclaiming she was the Earth Goddess. By the end of her environmental monologue, she resembled an abbreviated Greek statue, delivering the punch line, "So don't fuck around with Mother Nature!" with a toss of Shirley Temple curls and a chunky finger pointing an imaginary gun at us all. If she seemed more an overdressed kewpie doll in some four-door sedan's rear window than an all-powerful deity, never mind; she got her message across and in the process managed, like Madame Vardo, to charm her subjects totally.

Crystal Field had been an original member of the Lincoln Center Company and had appeared with Andre Gregory's illfated Philadelphia Theatre of the Living Arts in 1965. Besides acting and directing in her own company, she was featured in a number of films including Woody Allen's "Purple Rose of Cairo," "Splendor in the Grass," and Alan Parker's "Birdy." Her forte was as a comedienne, and when she teamed up with her husband, George Bartenieff, they affected a style that was perfect for Black Comedy, and it became their speciality.

Where Crystal was content to limit her acting roles to mostly comedy as her interests turned to directing, George continued expanding his repertoire and became in time one of the most versatile character actors in New York. Beginning with MADONNA IN THE ORCHARD by Paul Foster, at La MaMa in 1965, he acted in such diverse plays as TRELAWNY OF THE WELLS, THE MEMORANDUM, and ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL at the Public Theater, where he also appeared in THE EXPRESSWAY, a street play directed by his future wife that inaugurated the Other Stage Company. He, too, was a member of Gregory's Philadel-

phia troupe, and his Broadway and Off Broadway credits included the Living Theatre's *THE BRIG*, Beckett's *KRAPP'S LAST TAPE*, and Edward Albee's *THE ZOO STORY* (back-to-back at the Cherry Lane Theater), *MONTSERRAT*, by Lillian Hellman, *HOME FRIES* by John Guare, and Albee's *BOX MAO BOX* and *ROOM SERVICE* in 1969. With the Theater for the New City's production of *DIAGONAL MAN*, he made a five-country European tour, playing the title role in Polish, French, and German.

A little taller than Crystal (and a lot slimmer), as he got older George began to look more and more like the characters he was called on to create—slightly stooped and bald except for a fringe of grey hair, he could have been mistaken for a bemused, befuddled rural preacher caught with his clothes on in the midst of a nudist camp.

In time, the Theater for the New City outgrew the confines of the Ballroom, even though many successful projects were developed there, beginning with *THE ATLANTIC CROSSING*, a musical by Charles Mingus III, with music by Paul M. Jeffrey, choreography by Barbara Gardner, and directed by Lee Kissman. The price of admission remained the same as it had been at Westbeth and would never be again—two dollars (although TNC seldom went above ten dollars, and most shows through the years were five dollars). It continued its tradition of street plays in good weather, playing in the city's parks and playgrounds with talented casts of youngsters, one of whom was a lad billed as Timmy Robbins, who would grow up to be the movie star Tim Robbins. He was the pride and joy of Bartenieff and Field and would return "home" to help them celebrate the opening of TNC's permanent home on First Avenue in 1990. But from the Ballroom, it moved to the ground floor of a building on Second Avenue, just across from St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery, with small spaces in the basement and on the second floor for intimate stages. It was there that the Theater for the New City came of age during the next decade.

Sensitive to the ethnic diversity of the new neighborhood, a Hispanic Theater was inaugurated, encouraging work by playwrights such as Eduardo Machado, Miguel Pinero, and Maria Irene Fornes. A Women Playwrights Program was begun, showcasing the talents of Karen Malpede, Theodora Skipitares, Rosalyn Drexler, and Rochelle Owens. An annual Native American Dance Concert was incorporated, featuring grand pow wows by The Thunderbird Native American Dancers.

During the next twenty years, TNC garnered a Pulitzer Prize (for Sam Shepard's *BURIED CHILD* in 1978), thirty-five Obie awards, four ASCAP awards, and six Rockefeller Playwrights Fellowship awards. Its alumni included almost everyone who worked in experimental theater in New York. Tim Robbins said of his training there, "TNC opened my mind up to the limitless possibilities of theater." Judd Hirsch added, "TNC is cherished by the City and by all of us in the 'business'—the business, that is, of loving theater."

Some of the outstanding plays presented in that time included *THE WRITER'S OPERA* by Rosalyn Drexler, 1979; *LA JUSTICE* by Kenneth Bernard, 1979; *ORPHEUS IN AMERIKA* by Robert Patrick and Rob Felstein, 1980; *MORANDI'S* by Morton Lichter, 1980; *FLOP*, a new hit by Seth Allen, 1980; *FARMYARD* by Franz Xavier Croetz, 1981; *THE MEEHANS* by Charles Choset, 1981; *THE BLONDE LEADING THE BLONDE* by Stephen Holt, 1982 (starring Crystal Field and Lola Pashalinski); *SUCCESS AND SUCCESSION* by Ronald Tavel, 1983; *THE CONDUCT OF LIFE* by Maria Irene Fornes, 1985; *A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH* by Rosalyn Drexler, 1986; *THE HEART THAT EATS ITSELF* by Rosalyn Drexler, 1987; *CARRYING SCHOOL CHILDREN* by Thomas Babe, 1987; *HEATHEN VALLEY* by Romulus Linney, 1988; and *THREE POETS* by Romulus Linney, 1989.

From 1977, TNC commissioned more than twenty-five plays. Some of the best were *THE DANUBE* by Maria Irene Fornes; *TRANSIENTS WELCOME* by Rosalyn Drexler; *BAGLADY* by Jean-Claude van Itallie; *A MIDNIGHT SPOON AT THE GREASY SPOON* by Miguel Pinero; *MY FETUS LIVES ON AMBOY STREET* by Ronald Tavel; *TROPICAL FEVER IN KEY WEST* by Robert Heide; *ZONEW OF THE SPIRIT* by Amlin Williams; and *DINOSAUR DOOR* by Barbara Carson.

Bartenieff and Field had big things in mind for TNC's future that couldn't be realized in the limited space

on Second Avenue. They had their eye on a nearby municipal site. After four years of negotiations with New York, Theater for the New City moved in September 1986 into what had been a public market and later a garage for Sanitation Department vehicles at 15557 First Avenue, one block east and one block south of its former home. But, because of City Hall bureaucracy and the Sanitation Department's reluctance to evacuate, much of the planned expansion had to be put on hold. Included in the plans was a complete cultural complex: a two-hundred-forty-seat flexible theater, a one-hundred-seat proscenium theater, a dance/ video/performance space, an art gallery, café, cabaret, rehearsal rooms, a shop, and a much-needed office. It wasn't until well after 1990 that any of that was undertaken, and then in fits and starts, depending on funding. Until then, theatergoers had to travel across a vast cement garage to reach the little makeshift performing areas, divided off by curtains and leftover flats, and staggered starting times. My favorite, and the coziest, was a tiny basement cell that could only be reached by going out on the street and down a separate entrance. Many avoided it in mid-winter, but I found it an excellent venue for intimate chamber work. Also, with all the new high-tech installations being introduced into the main theater, it remained in spirit most like the old Ballroom: crude, unpredictable, unpolished, but never uninteresting.

For all their modish accouterments, Bartenieff and Field remained old-fashioned troupers in spirit, too. I could still picture them dancing off into the wings—

With a tip o' the hat
And a tap of the toe
And-a (three, four)
Shuffle off to Buf-fa-lo.

The second of the most unusual settings encountered for Off Broadway performing group habitation was a former notorious strip parlor at 416 West Forty-second Street, between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. Once upon a time, it had been a legitimate playhouse in a row of little theaters that began disappearing in the 1950s, their spaces taken over by "massage" parlors and porn shops and related sleaze vending. Prostitutes openly began soliciting at the curb, and recumbent winos made the rest of the sidewalk an obstacle course. Black dope pushers jostled for the best positions around the bent bus-stop stanchions; broken glass and litter peppered everything. Local cops considered it one of the worst blocks in the city and avoided it as much as possible.

The most unique thing about the ochre-colored cement building on the north side of the street was that it was the only two-storied structure among dilapidated five-story tenements and twice as wide as they—also twice as ugly, a veritable trash bin. Its two large central picture windows on the street had been cement-blocked to thin horizontal slits at the top. There was a door at either end of the structure. The right one led to the stairway to the second floor where a dubious organization calling itself The Sex Institute of Technology had an office; the other, protected by a threadbare canopy, led to a vestibule decorated with girly murals that turned a corner and dumped the patrons into the perpetually darkened sanctuary.

Across the blocked-out front windows was a big sign reading "The 42nd Street Playhouse Presents LIVE BURLESK—Midnight Show on Saturday." Nailed higher up was a crudely painted cut-out of a near-naked woman with breasts so pendulous that if they'd been real, it would have taken a derrick to keep them up. The ravages of time had left her legs cruelly amputated at the knees and her baby-doll profile was missing a nose. Tacked into a showcase at one side were black-and-white glossies of current entertainers. If one looked closely enough, evidence that it was once a legitimate playhouse could be just detected above one doorway with that word carved into the lintel, although almost obliterated by years of thick paint.

By the 1970s, burlesque on 42nd Street—in fact, all over Times Square—was a far cry from the glamorous era of Gypsy Rose Lee and Sally Keith, when ecdysiasts were artists as well as artistes. Now any female with brass and boobs could get hired, many of them the wives of the owners of the joints or their paramours. The only current requirement was to take it off, take it all off—ve-e-e-ery slowly. All the slob out front had come for anyway was that final flash of snatch. So, at those prices, whadja expect?

My friend, the baritone Jay Gallagher, and I briefly worked the three-to-eleven PM. shift at the phone room of the Automobile Club of New York answering inquiries—at that time, a fairly lucrative alternative to cab driving and waiting for entertainers “between assignments.” After work, we’d haunt all the Times Square dumps for laughs. Our favorites were ones like the Playhouse, where we’d sit in the rear, tittering like school girls in the joyless miasma. The recorded music was either undetectable or so loud it was earsplitting, competing with the sounds of the strippers’ thighs smacking together, and we kept a running bet over which of us could count the most black-and-blue spots as the “girls” slowly gyrated.

Into this uplifting scene walked Robert Moss in the fall of 1974, on a months-long search for a new home for his five-year-old theater company called Playwrights Horizons. Later, he remembered the first impact the block made on him: he was so petrified, he walked down the yellow median on the street rather than chance the sidewalk. But this was a last-ditch effort to find some kind of permanent mailing address, if nothing else, before the end of the year, to be eligible for the forty-four-thousand dollars in promised grant money desperately needed to keep the company in business. He was, by then, the president of the Off Off Broadway Association (OOBA), and well aware of what was and wasn’t available in affordable commercial performing space, and the outlook so far had been very bleak. Going back to storefront and basement venues was not tempting, and the few churches he’d approached let him know they had no intentions of being turned into clones of St. Clement’s. (A certain amount of rancor persisted in Episcopal circles over the fact that dramatics had all but precluded religious considerations at that establishment on Forty-sixth Street.)

In desperation, he rented the Playhouse but insisted on a short-term lease because he had no plans to remain in such crummy surroundings. He and an eager crew of volunteer thespians of all ages began cleaning out the accumulated grime inside, and renovations began in earnest on New Year’s Day, 1975. Little did he guess then that Playwrights Horizons would stay there for the rest of its existence and eventually own the building.

It took a month of concentrated effort—“slave labor”—to redo the theater. He called everyone he knew to help out in whatever way possible; an architect friend drew up construction plans, and a professional decorator gave color and fabric advice. The entire cost was five-thousand dollars, and, according to Moss, it might have been less than that if they all hadn’t made such blunders as trying to expose the overhead beams by tearing off all the plaster only to find that was a fire violation and had to be all railed up again.

During the renovation process, an interesting sociological sidelight developed; there was a decided change in the attitude of the street people lolling outside as they got used to seeing the crews of actors stream in and out of the Playhouse. From initial coolness, the prostitutes warmed up enough to exchange greetings and even call some of the actors “cubes.” The winos and dopies only got so far as to call them “stoopid” for working so hard for nothing.

It wasn’t for nothing, of course, and when the place was all ready to begin rehearsals for its first show, Moss got so excited that he went directly to the landlord and negotiated a longer lease.

In the late 1950s, the furthest thing from Robert Moss’s mind was founding his own performing company. All he wanted to be was an actor. He’d wanted nothing else since high school. He’d left Newark, New Jersey, and traveled several light years to New York City with nothing in his pocket but seventeen dollars and a dream of being on Broadway. Broadway was his only real choice in those days. There was no regional theater to speak of, no non-profit system yet, and except for the few coffee houses cropping up downtown, the only Off Broadway activity was centered around a few ambitious classical productions in midtown. He spent all of the early 1960s trying to break into the big time.

He was hired as a stage manager for Ellis Rabb’s APA Theater and quickly learned the business. He loved it, but, by 1967, had grown restless and wanted to try something on his own. APA was presenting an adaptation of Tolstoy’s WAR AND PEACE at the time, with an enormous cast of talented actors, many of whom did little more than carry flags in mob scenes. Moss, bemoaning the waste of such potential, hit on the idea

of gathering about twenty-five of them together to work on their own projects after hours. He found he had a knack for ordering people around without making them bristle, and he liked it. Short, with a dense beard that gave him the look of a friendly schnauzer (he had so much facial and head hair that it appeared chunks of it had been removed to accommodate forehead, nose, cheeks, and ears), he appeared no threat to his charges, and before he knew it, he was running an acting company. The first play worked on was Shakespeare's *TWO GENTLEMEN FROM VERONA*, and each night, after the final curtain of *WAR AND PEACE*, they'd get together, down a few beers in the costume shop, and rehearse until they felt like it in the morning. After four weeks of intensive work, Bob Moss rented Theater Four for two weeks and had some programs mimeographed at his own expense. "I didn't ask Equity's or anybody's permission," he remembered. 'I just went out and did it because I had to. It was capitalism at its best!'

Cast members invited all their friends and relatives to the opening, and it was a resounding success. Almost immediately, Moss was offered two directing jobs, and before long was discovered by Edward Albee and Richard Barr, who invited him to direct a play at their experimental Playwrights Unit at the Cherry Lane Theater. It was there that he became interested in new work by new writers—an interest that later became an obsession. His first playwright was Steve Jacobson, and he remembered being very reluctant to offer changes or suggestions for fear of hurting his feelings; they treated each other with careful consideration, bordering on Victorian over-politeness. It paid off, however, as it did in Moss's later dealings with writers. They developed a trusting relationship, and the successful results led to Moss being invited to run the entire Playwrights Unit in 1970.

"I had never produced,' Moss said, "and didn't know what it would be like. I was really sort of scared...but obviously I tasted blood, so I accepted. Well, that was it. I absolutely loved the work."

Unfortunately, the Playwrights Unit ran out of money the next year and folded. Moss was not only without a job, he didn't know where to turn for help. But that didn't last long. By chance, Louise Roberts was at the closing night performance at the Cherry Lane and heard one of his, by now, celebrated curtain speeches. (He was to continue making them at the Queens theater later but abandoned them on 42nd Street as too 'provincial.') Roberts ran the esteemed Clark Center for the Performing Arts, a dance-oriented organization that worked at the West Side Y on Fifty-first Street and Eighth Avenue. She contacted him numerous times, trying to persuade him to start a play unit there, but he balked at the idea of performing at a Y. She persisted, however, and finally he agreed to an interview. She showed him the space she had in mind: thirty-seven feet by forty feet, with thirteen-foot ceilings, and empty but for a few dilapidated platforms. Not very encouraging, he thought. Besides, she wanted him to set up a playwrights theater like that of Albee and Barr and recommend writers to start it. He didn't know any, frankly, but brashly suggested instead that if she wanted him to work there, she would have to give him the room with no strings attached and let him produce whatever he wanted.

To his amazement (and undying gratitude), she did just that—with no strings. And that was the beginning of a happy four-year relationship with the Y, during which the nucleus of what was to become his own theater was formed. Its name, Playwrights Horizons, was not Moss's first choice. He had opted for something more down-to-earth, like 'Hamburger Theater,' but the other company members pleaded for one that better described its goals. From the start, he had never formulated any big ideals he wanted to pursue, nor published a manifesto. All he wanted was simply to make theater—one day at a time. Now he was forced to stop, think, and try to articulate his intentions.

"I started intellectualizing and said something like, well, we're going to expand the horizons of playwrights, and someone said, 'That's it! Eureka!' So we named it Playwrights Horizons. I never really liked it. But, it served us well, and I have no complaints. A rose by any other name...'

Aside from rudimentary office expenses and building maintenance costs, there was no money to speak of for any productions. But then, not much was needed. Moss paid for the initial scenery, but even that came to

less than fifty dollars per show. In those early days of developmental theater, charging admission was tantamount to scaring off the very people it needed to survive—the audience. From the start, Off Off Broadway stood for equal dialogue between players and patrons, and no one had yet dared to sell tickets. The closest they came was passing the hat after the final curtain call to help out the actors. Moss insisted his theater had to be free also but was not averse to dangling an old grey plastic bag afterwards at the front of the house, good-naturedly chiding the crowd if it wasn't filled before they left the premises. The daily take amounted to about one dollar per patron and that was put toward production expenses. None of the performers received anything. (That all changed, of course, when they moved to 42nd Street, and he signed an Off Broadway contract with Equity which insisted that admissions be charged and tickets be printed and distributed.)

During those four years at Clark Center, some significant plays were presented for the first time, most notably Robert Patrick's *KENNEDY'S CHILDREN*, Albert Innaurato's first eighteen-minute piece, *UHRLIGHT*, and David Rimmer's *ALBUM*. In all, during the first year alone, fifteen full productions were mounted for runs of twelve performances each, and fifteen workshop presentations of five performances each. Also in that time, Moss admitted he must have read every script ever written, except, maybe, *HENRY IV, PART II*.

The Y suffered an appalling fiscal crisis in 1974 and was forced to close. With it went Playwrights Horizons' home. Moss was devastated. He was prepared to stay on there forever, providing playwrights with the place and means to see their work develop in production. He still didn't visualize Playwrights Horizons in terms of a growing entity, requiring enormous budgets, administrative staff, and the like. But, there he was, without a theater again for the second time in five years, and no prospects.

The circumstances were different now, however—there were those promised grants amounting to forty-four-thousand dollars that would be forfeited if one wasn't found soon. Hence the frantic search and the eventual settlement among the broken bottles, cigarette butts, and discarded G-strings of 42nd Street.

After settling Playwrights Horizons permanently into Number 416, Bob Moss thought that if he could do all that with practically no experience or expertise, why couldn't others? Why couldn't the rest of the block be taken over in the same way and made into a theater enclave again? He incorporated The Forty-Second Street Gang under the auspices of the Cultural Council Foundation toward that end. The plan was to rent all the properties on the block and lease spaces to other companies, expedited by the Forty-Second Street Redevelopment Corporation, headed by Fred Papert. It was the beginning of Theater Row. In time, a new high-rise apartment house went up across the street, the owners promising that at least half of the units would be rented to theater-oriented tenants. Trees replaced mounds of trash along the curbs; new cafés and restaurants opened; and, best of all, audiences were attracted in droves. All originally the dream of the bearded boy wonder who started out only wanting to act on Broadway and direct a show of his own.

The old Y customers hadn't forgotten Moss or Playwrights Horizons and were among the first-nighters at the new theater. They, and then many more, returned again and again to see premieres of such seminal works as Wendy Wasserstein's *MONTPELIER PA-ZAZZ*, Albert Innaurato's *GEMINI*, Ted Tally's *HOOTERS*, James Lapine's *TABLE SETTINGS*, Christopher Durang's *THE ACTOR'S NIGHTMARE*, and A. R. Gurney, Jr.'s *THE DINING ROOM*.

The person most responsible for discovering and encouraging the new writers wasn't Moss, however, but another young man who had insinuated himself into the fold around 1975 and hung around to become its eventual artistic director.

Andre Bishop was an instantly likable guy with an easy grin and an English-school-boy-style flap of unruly brown hair falling over one eyebrow. He was little more than a volunteer "pencil-sharpener and go-fer" at first. Then he got interested in reading the growing numbers of unsolicited scripts that were arriving and made notes on them for Moss, who, until then, had done that himself. As time passed, Bishop created a title for himself—Literary Manager—and was put on salary. Moss described the turning point of their relationship and his to the company:

“He comes to me one day with about ten scripts in envelopes and he stands in front of my desk. I said, ‘Where are you going?’ and he said, ‘To the post office to return these. They’re terrible!’ And I said, ‘But I haven’t read them yet.’ He didn’t say a thing. Just stood there. It was a very tense moment, but I knew that if the theater was going to grow, I had to let him go to the post office with those scripts. I knew he was competent, so I took a deep breath and said, ‘Bye!’ Little by little, he assumed more responsibility until about two years ago (1978) when it became clear to me that he and I had coproduced the season. All I really had to do was step out of the way. I didn’t make him artistic director, he was artistic director.”

Thereafter, Moss took more interest in the second company he had founded in the Borough of Queens, called Playwrights Horizons Queens. In 1975, the state doubled its arts appropriations and had nowhere in the borough to spend it. He grabbed it and opened the Queens Theatre-In-The-Park in Flushing Meadow at the site of the World’s Fair New York State Pavilion. Successful productions were transferred there from 42nd Street for longer runs at the more family-oriented, lower-priced venue. He remained a member of the Playwrights Horizons board but gradually turned over all operations in Manhattan to Bishop.

Under the new director, the theater was made more serviceable physically. Gone were the last remnants of the burlesque murals and peeling plaster; the leaking basement toilets functioned normally again; and there was a heating system that really heated—not like back in the 1976-1977 season. As Albert Innaurato recalled, ‘When we produced GEMINI, we had no heat, and it was the coldest winter in fifty years in New York. GEMINI takes place in June. Most of the actors at one time or another wear summer attire. André scared up these big heat blowers from somewhere to direct at the audience. I don’t know how he got them. He must have begged a friend.’ In the first months as artistic director, André even sold some very nice antique furniture his mother had given him to help meet expenses, thinking that’s what artistic directors did.

One of the most significant projects, begun by Moss and continued by Bishop, was the Music Theatre Program, originally called Say It With Music. It had been created in 1979 to fill the need for a professional workshop in which talented composers and lyricists could test and refine their work and further explore the boundaries of the form. William Finn was the first artist in the new venture and, being among the initial backers of the program, we were able to follow his career from the beginning.

Born and raised in Natick, Massachusetts, only a few towns away from Medway, where I grew up, he admitted to being no child prodigy. He never played a musical instrument and couldn’t remember having more than an average interest in music. After high school, he had planned to major in English in college and was accepted by a number of them on that premise. He chose Williams in the western part of the state after having seen a touring production of COMPANY by another Williams-ite, Stephen Sondheim, in Boston that, he claimed, changed his whole direction. He decided what he really wanted to do was compose musicals. (He was occasionally asked later if he minded when critics compared his work to Sondheim’s, and he would reply that he didn’t but that probably Sondheim was pissed at being compared to him.)

He added music to his other studies at Williams and was the worst one in the classes (he said, although he wrote a student musical there called SIZZLE with lyrics by Charlie Rubin, that was well received, and he was awarded the Hutchinson Fellowship for Musical Composition and the Gabriel Prize for Directing.) He had no legitimate musical training and couldn’t even read music. In fact, he had to eventually develop his own method of notation, admitting he was the only person who could decipher it, and tended to play all his compositions in one key. He flunked his music courses and abandoned them.

He continued writing songs, however, and eventually gravitated to New York City in 1978 and began putting on small shows that he called CABARET SONGS in the living room of his apartment. One of the characters who popped up in all of them and sang most of the best songs was named Marvin, but, at the time, Finn had no idea of writing a musical (or, three, as it turned out) around him.

For one of the mini-musicals, JOCKS, he wrote a number called “Whizzer Going Down.” It was probably the first time in recorded history that a song was written celebrating fellatio. But there it was, telling of a guy

named Whizzer going down on—whom else? Marvin. It only hinted at a possible story line, but it stayed in his mind. André Bishop attended, but almost didn't get to see a JOCKS performance. It was held up for what seemed an eternity, for Finn was expecting an important producer from Washington, D. C., who had called to report he'd been delayed but was on his way. The show was slated to have begun at 10:00 P.M., and they waited one hour—then two, then three. Still no producer. Most of the audience gave up and departed. Finn's mother went into the kitchen and began cooking supper. Finally, the producer arrived at about 2:00 A.M., and the show got underway, but the only ones left to watch it were he and Bishop. Finn was so impressed with André's patience and consideration, he never forgot it, and it was the beginning of a close association that would produce some of the most exciting work of the next decade.

Andre didn't find the show very compelling, but he was impressed with the songs, especially a very funny one called 'The Nausea Before The Game' (about watching baseball) that would eventually turn up in the last one of the Marvin Trilogy of musicals. He told Ira Weitzman, the director of the Musical Theater Labs about it, and he went to see it. Weitzman was impressed with the Marvin songs also and suggested Finn work on developing a show centered around that character.

The result was IN TROUSERS, and William Finn not only wrote the music and lyrics (there was no spoken dialogue in this or the other two Marvin plays), he directed it, and, for a short time, starred as Marvin. It was presented on the main stage after a series of previews in the smaller performing space Moss and Bishop had carved out upstairs for work-in-progress in 1979.

It was clear to all concerned, however, that Finn was spreading his talents too thinly. He was told he could either direct or play the lead, but not both. He chose to direct but then complained later that "was a mistake. They should have kept their mouths shut, and let me do both. As a consequence, I never acted again after that. Chip Zien then appeared as Marvin and later, another actor. But I feel that a part is always played best by the person it was written for, and the character of Marvin was written for me."

Bill Finn was twenty-five-years old at the time—a tall, outwardly affable, heavy-set fellow with low, thick eyebrows, and an inclination to guffaw loudly after every few sentences, serious or not. The laughter was a smoke screen. It masked a touchy, easily bruised ego that was to cause him a lot of heartache and stress later on.

IN TROUSERS had a cast of only four: Marvin; his wife-to-be, Trina; his teacher, Miss Goldberg; and another high school sweetheart, unnamed. In the initial program, none were mentioned by name, only by description, followed by the actor playing the role:

with the sneakers	Chip Zein
with the pink shirt	Alison Fraser
with blonde hair	Joanna Green
with the sunglasses	Mary Testa

(Chip Zien not only replaced Finn in the lead, he was the only actor to appear in all three plays, albeit in different roles. Alison Fraser performed again in the second play.)

The story tells of a young Jewish boy's self-discovery and sexual awakening—with both men and women; his early marriage; and coming to terms with his homosexuality. Because there is no spoken dialogue, one song ends and is followed by another, collage fashion, making for choppy continuity at best. Although just about everyone got the picture in "Whizzer Going Down," which was included in the show, much of the rest baffled the audience. For example, the very first song, 'Marvin's Giddy Seizures,' is supposed to describe Marvin's leaving his wife for his lover, Whizzer. But many thought he was trying to tell them he was epileptic.

Flawed as the work was, however, the songs themselves were universally praised, as was the production.

Special notice was taken of the trio of young women who not only belted their own songs beautifully, but harmonized like the Supremes, and at times had the audience stomping and clapping along in rhythm.

IN TROUSERS was not extended beyond its scheduled run, but it didn't just disappear from sight, either. A cast album was cut, and before anyone knew it, it had developed a cult following, the likes of which happened with such intensity only in New York.

Several months later, I was back at Playwrights Horizons monitoring the first play by another young writer at the upstairs theater. At intermission, a big, bearish guy approached and handed me a flat, wrapped package.

'Hi, I'm Finn,' he announced in a loud, brash voice. 'This is for you.' (Nervous guffaw.)

My mind was still on the show I'd been watching, and since we had never met face to face, his name didn't



MARCH OF THE FALSETTOS, 1981: James Kushner, Michael Rupert, Stephen Bogardus, Chip Zien

register immediately. Somewhat piqued at having my concentration interrupted, I replied in an equally flip manner, 'I'm Russell. Thanks.' And then, giving a curt, little salute, turned back toward my chair.

'Goddamit, I told them it wouldn't work,' he said angrily. 'But thanks for the help anyway.' And with that, his eyes blinked wildly behind horn rims, and he left in a huff.

When I got home, I saw that it was a signed recording of IN TROUSERS and realized his gruffness was from nerves. I called Bob Moss the next day to apologize for my rudeness, and he laughed and said it was

his fault—he had put Finn up to it against his wishes because he felt (rightly) that I would appreciate getting his first recording from the artist himself. I wrote a note to Bill Finn, as much to smooth the way for future involvements as anything else, because there was bound to be some. Of that I had no doubt. Here was a rare talent that should have every encouragement.

There was a second production of *IN TROUSERS* later in Los Angeles that became a resounding success and had a healthy run, to everyone's surprise, especially Finn's. In 1981, another revival was done at the Second Stage Theater, run by Carole Rothman and Robin Goodman, who had received a seminal grant from us earlier in the year; and yet another, at the Promenade Theater in Manhattan in 1985, coproduced by TV super-jock Gregory Harrison, starring Tony Cummings as Marvin. But none of these later versions could right the wrongs inherent in the weak script. Even so, Finn was so obsessed with the Marvin character, he wanted to continue his story, hoping to improve on *IN TROUSERS*. But he realized now that he needed help with the book.

He had seen a play at Playwrights Horizons in 1979 called *TABLE SETTINGS* that impressed him. It wasn't a musical, but it was constructed and directed like one by its author, James Lapine. Finn had recently written some songs that were being performed as a musical-in-progress at the upstairs theater under the title *4 JEWS IN A ROOM BITCHING*. Although it was getting good reception from the small invited audience it played to, he knew it was just another collage piece and wondered if someone like Lapine could help him. Even though he'd never worked with anyone before and didn't have the personality for it, he summoned the courage to ask Lapine to be his collaborator. For his part, Jim had never done a musical, wasn't sure he wanted to, and hated the title. But he finally acquiesced, after Finn agreed to change the name to the *MARCH OF THE FALSETTOS*. It was an instant success when it opened in 1981, and Lapine's influence was evident in the stronger structure and seamless storyline, although it maintained the all-music, no-dialogue format of *IN TROUSERS*.

Briefly it describes Marvin's life with Whizzer after leaving his wife and son Jason. The psychiatrist Mendel falls in love and marries the wife Trina. Whizzer eventually walks out on Marvin, and Marvin and Jason try to develop a meaningful father-son relationship in the end. Chip Zien played Mendel this time around; Alison Fraser returned as Trina; and James Kushner was Jason. Michael Rupert played the adult Marvin, and the role of Whizzer was taken by Stephen Bogardus—both strong, virile singing actors who became so closely identified with their roles that, when the third play in the trilogy was readying for production, it was unanimously agreed that the pair must return to continue their characters, or it wouldn't work.

Critics praised the lack of any campiness in the play or any proselytizing. They all hailed the showing of homosexual couples as having the same anxieties, neuroses, and feelings of loneliness as heterosexuals, and noted the touching relationships involved. Finn's score and Lapine's staging were applauded, as were all the actors, especially young Kushner when he sang the anguished "My Father's A Homo" and then went on to worry aloud about his own chromosomes.

After *MARCH OF THE FALSETTOS*, Finn wanted a change and tried rewriting an earlier musical that had not fared well when it was presented at Playwrights Horizons in 1983. It then had the title *AMERICA KICKS UP ITS HEELS* and was supposed to have been a light-hearted spoof on, of all things, the Great Depression. Set in a 1930s soup kitchen (designed by Santo Loquasto), it had a largely white cast including an Eleanor Roosevelt character and featured Broadway singing star Patti Lupone (*EVITA*).

Bill Finn sought me out during an intermission one night and plunked himself down cross-legged in the aisle beside my chair, totally oblivious to the patrons trying to get over and around him (he had gained a lot of weight since last time and now had a thick, dark beard that only emphasized his bearlike appearance). He leaned one elbow on my knee and launched into a frenzied, funny diatribe on everything and everyone that bothered him. As usual, each sentence was punctuated with a little forced guffaw indicating none of it should be taken seriously. But I couldn't help thinking This guy's harboring a lot of deep grievances he'd

better unload if he knows what's good for him. To change the subject, I reminded him about the proximity of our home towns (small world!) and that I knew a few Irish families in Natick, but none named Finn. He snorted and slapped my knee, "Honey, my name only sounds Irish. I'm Jewish! Something about my ancestors changing an unpronounceable middle-European handle when they got off at Ellis Island. A lot of people are fooled by it."

He revised AMERICA for a basically black cast (except for Mrs. Roosevelt) and added soul music reminiscent of the Broadway blockbuster DREAMGIRLS (1981-1982). He even changed the title to ROMANCE IN HARD TIMES, and Joe Papp gave it a full production at the Public Theater in 1989, directed by David Warren, with sets by James Youmans and costumes by David C. Woolard. But none of that helped. It was still a bad show, and it got mercilessly panned by almost every critic.

This plummeted Finn into his own Great Depression. He had never had a resounding failure, and the effect was crippling. It got so bad that Bishop began to fear for his sanity and wrote me about his concern. He felt the only way to help was to encourage him to take up the Marvin Trilogy again, and we offered another grant for the purpose. Finn had written a few songs with the last play in mind, and there were still some from way back, like "The Nausea Before The Game," that hadn't been used. So he and Lapine collected them loosely into a sketch for a new musical, and, with the title MARVIN'S SONGS, tried it out in the upstairs theater during two closed performances in April 1989.

Very little more was done with it during the summer. But in the late fall, Lapine, who was by then in France directing a movie, began calling Finn repeatedly in New York, urging him to finish it for a spring opening. Finn's answer each time was that he didn't think he could. 'I sit down at the piano, and there's nothing left.'

With enough coaxing from abroad and plenty of TLC at home, however, Finn did get it ready for the planned opening in 1990. Lapine returned to direct it, and Michael Rupert and Stephen Bogardus were back in their old roles as Marvin and Whizzer. Chip Zien was Mendel, again, with Faith Prince as Trina, and Danny Gerard as Jason. Two new characters were introduced—a lesbian couple. One, an internist played by Heather MacRae, and her "nouvelle Kosher cuisine" caterer roommate, Janet Metz, who added moments of comic relief (Metz sang to her lover at one point, "You save lives, and I save chicken fat.'). And, as a Greek chorus introduced dire forebodings of an impending plague-like epidemic, the internist sang, "Something bad is happening, seems a virus, something bad is spreading, stories that go underground."

It had a new title also, FALSETTOLAND, and took up where MARCH OF THE FALSETTOS left off in 1981. Marvin and Trina (now Mrs. Mendel) are planning Jason's bar mitzvah. Marvin and Whizzer meet again by chance at a Little League baseball game that Jason is playing in ("The Nausea Before The Game"), and return to each other. Jason rebels against the bar mitzvah preparations, especially his stepfather's involvement in it. Mendel tries to explain that "Everyone Hates His Parents," and the two end up doing a soft-shoe dance number.

The ominous 'something' the internist foresees is the deadly disease that has just been given a name—AIDS, and it is discovered that Whizzer is dying of it. Jason tries to make a deal with God that if He will save Whizzer, the bar mitzvah will take place. The last scene is a private celebration around Whizzer's hospital bed. The two plot lines are then brought together beautifully and tenderly with a last, heart-wrenching, sung soliloquy by Marvin as he embraces Whizzer and reconfirms his love, "How can I face tomorrow, after having been robbed of today?"

For all its final pathos, FALSETTOLAND was never allowed to become maudlin, and much of the credit for that had to go to the director and cast, who all performed superbly. Most critics agreed it was the best of the three Marvin plays. Frank Rich in *The New York Times* called it a work of courage and jubilation, not defeat, and William A. Henry, in *Time* magazine pronounced it the first great musical of 1990.

After a sold-out run at Playwrights Horizons, the entire production was transferred to the Lucille Lortel

Theater (formerly deLys) on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village in September 1990, with only one cast change: Chip Zien left because of prior commitments and was replaced by Lonnie Price. There it packed them in for many months, due, in no little part, some believed, to Bill's mother, Barbara Finn (of late-supper-making fame). Bill's friend and colleague, Wendy Wasserstein, wrote some radio commercials for the show using Barbara's voice. During a break in the taping session, Barbara was asked how she felt having such a successful son, and, not realizing the mikes were still on, gave a very Jewish-mother reply, complete with stereotypical inflections: "He coulda been ha doctor. He coulda been ha lawyer. But, no, my son writes MUSICALS!" The reply cracked everyone up, and the ad agency decided to use it unedited. Along with two other spots Wasserstein had written, it was aired immediately, and, according to Mrs. Finn, business was never better!

Since inaugurating the Music Theatre Program, Andre Bishop and his long-time executive director Paul S. Daniels produced at least one major musical in the downstairs Mainstage each year, as well as numerous readings and works-in-progress in the upstairs studio. They were as diverse as the composers and lyricists who wrote them, from *ONCE ON THIS ISLAND*, based on Caribbean folk legends, by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty (1989-1990) to the Finn-Lapine series, to *SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE*, by Stephen Sondheim (1982-1983). To nurture less well-known emerging talents, they introduced the New Theatre Wing, featuring works by playwrights, composers, and poets who were virtually unknown. The only stipulation adhered to religiously was that each production had to be kept within a thirty-five-thousand-dollar budget, rehearsals were limited to six weeks, and the runs would be no longer than sixteen performances. Ticket prices were also kept at or about five dollars to attract as many young patrons as possible.

As part of the Music Theatre Program, Playwrights Horizons hosted the Foundation of the Dramatists Guild Young Playwrights Festival each year for writers under the age of eighteen. In addition to presenting the plays of the finalists, the New Theatre Wing held readings of scripts all year and opened up matinée performances to New York City high school students.

Bishop and Daniels initiated other important service programs that benefited many small theater groups. One was the founding of the Playwrights Horizons Theatre School, an undergraduate program offered to theater majors in non-performance disciplines like directing, dramaturgy, and theater management, toward a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in association with New York University. Ticket Central, a small marketing and box office service for smaller performing arts groups in the city, was in a chaotic state and on the verge of being abandoned in 1983, when they took over, reorganized it, and made it the virtual link between the theaters and the public it was intended to be—and more. By 1990, the number of participating arts groups had grown from twenty-three to over one-hundred-twenty-five, with ticket sales rising to in excess of a million-and-a-half dollars.

In 1985, Playwrights Horizons took over a moribund scenic design studio in Brooklyn and transformed it into a useful, low-cost, scenery-making workshop where performing groups could have props and flats made at minimal rates, and, after the end of productions, find cheap storage spaces for them. There was also technical equipment to be rented nominally and a trucking service that could carry anything anywhere up and down the eastern seaboard. Responding to the critical need for affordable rehearsal and performance space among New York's small non-profit companies and individual artists, Bishop and Daniels set up Theatre Row Studios, another low-cost rental service on the Row that included use of the Judith Anderson, Samuel Beckett, and Harold Clurman theaters, and fifteen-thousand additional square footage of studio space available at negotiable rates well below those of comparable facilities.

In September 1987, responding to a leaked plan to raze the two-story structure to accommodate a new commercial high rise, the trustees of Playwrights Horizons purchased its remodeled "pleasure palace," thus assuring a permanent future headquarters for the nurturing of emerging playwrights to carry on the high standards set there in the past. It took a lot of patience, total commitment, and intensely shared love to develop and turn out the likes of *DRIVING MISS DAISY*, the Pulitzer Prize winner by Alfred Uhry (1986-1987);

THE HEIDI CHRONICLES by Wendy Wasserstein (1988-1989); SISTER MARY IGNATIUS EXPLAINS IT ALL TO US and THE ACTOR'S NIGHTMARE by Christopher Durang (1981-1982); THE DINING ROOM by A. R. Gurney, Jr. (1981-1982); GENIUSES by Jonathan Reynolds (1980-1981); ROMANCE LANGUAGE by Peter Parnell (1984-1985); THE SUBSTANCE OF FIRE by Jon Robin Baitz (1990); THE TRANSFORMATION OF BENNO BLIMPIE by Albert Innaurato (1982-1983); and on and on.

LOVE seemed to have been the operating code word to success at Playwrights Horizons, reflecting the words of its founder in 1980, "When I go into rehearsal," Robert Moss said, "I always tell my actors this: History has taught us that most productions don't work. We don't know if we're going to succeed or fail. So we had better love the process of putting it together. We better love these four weeks. Then, whatever happens, fine. We at least will have had our joy.'

Before leaving permanently for Queens, Moss introduced me to two struggling small companies in 1978 that he'd found while monitoring for the National Endowment for the Arts and given free rehearsal space to at 416 West Forty-second Street. He wanted to be sure they would be "taken care of" after he'd gone. They were Shared Forms Theatre and Creation Productions Company, both as diverse and far removed from the mainstream as experimental theater could get, yet destined, partly because of their difficult and uncompromising approaches, to remain little-known and underfunded.

Shared Forms was founded in 1973 by Rob McBrien, a tall, ectomorphic figure skater out of Northwestern University, and Wendy Wasdahl, originally a ballet dancer who began a stage career in San Francisco. She was a petite brunette with large, mischievous eyes set in a long, deadpan face reminiscent of that of the late, great British comedienne, Bea Lillie. Movement, quite naturally, was the first noticeable feature of their dramatic pieces, accompanied by sound effects of real phenomena like bubbling water in a mountain stream, or wind sweeping across a desert plane; music was the other—and the most important of all. "We choreograph entire scenes to music, just as one would choreograph a dance to music,' Wasdahl explained. Recorded scores were used in a cinematic way to create moods and bridge connecting sequences.

When I first saw it, Shared Forms (the name described its function) consisted of McBrien and Wasdahl as principal performers as well as writers, and its performing space was a tiny loft at 17 White Street in Tribeca. The two were working on THE ILLUSTRATED JOURNAL with Margaret Kennedy. The text came from the writings of the Greek-born mystic philosopher G. I. Gurdjieff, written on his travels throughout Asia, with added text by his disciple Maurice Nicoll. It consisted of six episodes depicting Gurdjieff's association with a Polish courtesan/musical mystic named Vitvitskaia, in locales ranging from a concert hall (where they first met) to the shores of the Black Sea, a folding tent in Azerbaijan, the deck of an ocean liner on the Atlantic, a cellar in France, and a cottage near St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1911.

Mime and dance movements fleshed out the fragmentary script, set to music by Chopin and Debussy, interspersed with Middle Eastern folk tunes. As with every piece they developed, McBrien and Wasdahl succeeded in a traditional mixing of the arts of theater and opera, with its time-honored rituals and symbols, costumes, and make-up, but imbued it all with a compelling mystical serenity. As one critic said, an evening of Shared Forms theater was so haunting, it floated through one's mind years later. Moving away from purely intellectual approaches to theater, to express human, physical expressions of emotions, feelings, and relationships, the work was rooted in conceptualism of the 1960s but acknowledged the conventions of melodrama, Restoration comedy, and naturalism.

The performing area was actually one room; the audience entered from the hallway at one end and occupied two scant rows of seats along the wall. The performers made their entrances and exits from a cubicle or closet at the opposite corner. Sets were often elaborately detailed and painstakingly rendered but simple in proportion. For THE ILLUSTRATED JOURNAL, Ron Janowich created masterpieces of understatement—the folding tent, a strategically placed set of chairs for box seats, and a length of railing placed diagonally

across the room to suggest the deck of a ship at sea.

The tiny loft was turned into an antechamber of the palace of a Sumerian king for Shared Forms' production of *GILGAMESH, CA 3000BC: TABLETS 1-8*, based on the world's oldest-known epic, transmitted orally during the half century after the monarch's death and then recorded in cuneiform on clay blocks around 2100 B.C. The tablets were excavated and deciphered in the nineteenth century, and it was from the first eight of those that Wasdahl and McBrien culled the material for the drama. In it, Gilgamesh (McBrien), the fifth king of Uruk (along the Euphrates River in southern Babylon) and the strongest and proudest man in the world, seemed in need of a lesson in humility. So the gods created an untamed wild man named Enkidu (Tony Nunziata) who became his companion and alter ego. Their relationship was a humbling experience for



GILGAMESH (1979); l-r: Rob McBrien, Tony Nunziata,
Wendy Wasbahl
Shared Forms Theatre

Photo by David Stark

both of them, and in the course of the stories, they realized their combined natures—barbaric and civilized—were stronger than either singly.

They united to successfully face the evil forces within the Babylonian world, Gilgamesh growing less arrogant as he became more powerful, and, at Enkidu's death, learning to transcend human sorrow to grasp a wider understanding of the two aspects of life—the ever changing and decaying, and the eternal.

It was Enkidu's tale, really: his early wild existence, then first encounter with man, and, more importantly,

woman (with Wendy Wasdahl playing all the female roles in his wanderings); his bond with the king; and finally, their adventures and revelations. Joanna Hoffman, dressed in a black robe, sat throughout the piece on the floor stage left and underscored and commented on the activity by use of stone and tubular instruments that produced weird tympanic effects, by narration, and, at times, by briefly becoming characters in the stories.

The price of admission to all Shared Forms' early productions, including those performed in its first home at 25 West Thirty-eighth Street, such as *CELL PIECE* (1974), inspired by popular science fiction, and *MEMORIES OF THE SALTIMBANQUES* (1976), influenced by the paintings of Pablo Picasso, was three dollars. Since fewer than twenty-four bodies could be squeezed into the loft's seating area, it followed that, if the troupe was to gain wider recognition and earn enough to subsist on, it would have to find a larger venue. The Performing Garage on Wooster Street was the only theater then that allowed outside companies to use it on a split box-office basis instead of up front fees, so McBrien and Wasdahl negotiated to use it for their next collaboration, an adaptation of Henry James's ninety-page "nouvelle" *IN THE CAGE*, written, incidentally, when James was recuperating from a dismal debut as a playwright—he had been hooted off the stage in London's West End.

IN THE CAGE is about a very intelligent, imaginative young woman's longings for release from the cage of her drab, ordinary job as a counter clerk in a British post office. She immerses herself in a fantasy world created by the messages sent through the office between upper-class customers, most notably those between a grand beauty, Lady Bradeen, and her local roguish paramour, the dashing Captain Everard. She imagines that she is their closest companion in all their escapades and eventually falls in love with the captain, who views her from the other side of the enclosure with arch curiosity and no little disdain, which excites her even more. It is a psychological study of the power of imagination to project itself onto reality, and, at times, replace it.

Their adaptation, again involving the written and spoken word, stage movement and dance, sound and music, as in previous shows, added a new innovation: scored telegraphic clicks that aurally created the atmosphere of the surroundings. In fact, as the audiences arrived to take their seats before the start (and if they were very aware), they could hear the sounds of Morse Code tapping out the first three pages of the nouvelle—a touch so typical of the Shared Forms aesthetic. Another interesting aspect was introducing Henry James as a character (played by McBrien). It allowed for a fascinating and amusing interplay between the author and the heroine (Wendy Wasdahl), with her constantly stopping action to offer him advice on the play and plot as it progressed, and his becoming so receptive that he was inspired to develop the narrative in ways he wouldn't have thought of on his own. In a delightful conclusion, he approached her cage to post the completed manuscript of *IN THE CAGE* to his publisher.

The cage itself was an ingenious contraption—a movable wire and wood cube created by set designer John Berger—that could be spun around the stage at whatever velocity fitted the young woman's mood at the moment. The costumes by Bill Taylor were as imaginative and elaborate as any Broadway production, if not more so. He caught the staid flavor of Victorian England in greys and mauves and then added a shocking, fire-engine red petticoat beneath the drab clerk's frock that tumbled into view like volcanic lava whenever she twirled in the cage—a vivid metaphor for her erotic yearnings.

Instead of incorporating expected, turn-of-the-century schmaltzy Viennese music, Wasdahl and McBrien chose jarring contemporary rock renditions by German singer Nina Hagen and her electronic band (her name will appear again later in the section on John Kelly). Loud and brassy, but passionately and warmly sung, it effectively intersected with the narrative and highlighted the important moments of the drama. The cast was a large one by Shared Forms' standards and included Jim Harris, Anthony Moore, John Miglietta, Julia Palmore, and Nancy Sumner. The lighting was by La MaMa expert, Blu, and Tony Nunziata (the wild creature in *GILGAMIESH*) orchestrated the sound metaphors.

The last work that Rob McBrien and Wendy Wasdahl collaborated on was a deceptive-seeming trifle titled *MINIMUM DAILY REQUIREMENT*, a multimedia affair focusing on food obsession—Americans' mania for dieting and weight-loss miracles. Performed in the cavernous temple of avant-garde in the Village, the Washington Square Methodist Church, it was staged like a vast carnival ground with booths and actors in them proselytizing wonder remedies and palliatives.

Vignettes bombarded us with such speed, it was difficult to remember which ones did or didn't work: there were slides of lethal-looking food utensils; sideshow distorting mirrors; a man and woman lost in an amorous embrace until he caressed what she perceived was a slight bulge at her waist, and she recoiled in abject horror; an anorexic woman jealously spying the smooth, flat body of a nude adolescent boy; cooking lessons; food commercials; a talk show with diet doctor superstars like Atkins, Pritkin, Stillman, and Tarnower as guest gurus; and frantic joggers wearing themselves out to the soundtrack of 'Fame/I Wanna Live Forever.'

In the final sequence, all eight actors laid a picnic table with bowls of fruit, wine, flowers, and covered dishes, and then pulled up chairs and sat down to enjoy the meal with much jollity and chatter. As the audience filed out, ushers in the lobby handed each of them a plastic-wrapped salami.

The lightweight quality of the presentation was deceptive. The members of Shared Forms had been involved all winter in serious research on diets, dieting, fitness manuals, advertising, newspaper articles, and related reading. They conducted interviews with the public on eating habits, and then through discussion and improvisation, molded the information into the piece we saw. It was typical again of how thoroughly they approached each subject that caught their attention, and the intelligent and unique dramatic way they presented it. Their very uniqueness, in fact, eventually separated them from the conceptual art movement of the 1970s with which they had formative links and sent them into their own distinctive orbit.

Cutbacks in federal and state funding weighed heavily on the two artistic directors along with the realization that, after almost a decade of exposure, any hope for a significant increase in audience potential was unlikely. Their work was simply too specialized for wide appeal. Drawn back more and more to an earlier career, Rob McBrien made the difficult decision to leave the company and return to full-time, professional figure skating. That left Wendy Wasdahl to cope on her own, which she did valiantly. But, as she confessed in a heart-rending letter later announcing the break-up of the company, the "Forms were no longer Shared," and therefore would never be the same again.

It took her two years to develop the next (and final) piece called *CULTIVATING PARADISE*, scripted with Janet Sternburg and co-directed with Ayaz Maile, with scenic elements by John Berger, costumes by Janetta Turner, and lighting by Joni Wong. With five actors—Andrew Arnault, Cara Caldwell, Peter Cuneen, Trinket Monsod, and Steve Spicehandler she presented aspects of gardens and gardeners through the centuries, from England's Capability Brown to his modern counterpart Gertrude Jeckyll, whose words defined the gentle attitude of the play, "My garden is my workshop, it's my private study, it's my place of rest." (And to make sure it stayed that way, she had a gravel walk laid to her potting shed so that she knew in advance when unwelcomed intruders, especially her cantankerous father, were about to invade her privacy)

Laid out in linear fashion in the barn-like space at Common Ground, Wooster and Grand Streets in Soho, various tableaux were presented in mime and spoken words drawn from episodes since the tenth century, backed up by a tender-loving musical score by Skip LaPlante. Medieval serfs worked the harsh soil in one patch while richly dressed esthetes laid out herb patterns in another. Frederick Law Olmstead, the designer of Central Park, finished the last corner of it himself and then opened it to strollers, nannies, athletes, lovers, loungers, and muggers. In the final scene, apartment dwellers cleared a rubble-ridden vacant city lot to make way for a community garden as the amplified sounds of seeds crackling in packets grew louder, and the lights dimmed.

It was a fragile, loving farewell piece—the kind you wanted to embrace gently and protect from the harsh elements. William Harris considered it a probable metaphor for our collective desire to return to Eden (East

Village Eye, 1984). But Tish Dace, a longtime champion of Shared Forms, had the last word on it: 'On the surface, not as ambitious a work as...EPIC OF GILGAMESH or IN THE CAGE, CULTIVATING PARADISE is actually a more difficult work because it takes as its inspiration the potentially undramatic concept of gardening. It is very much to the credit of this innovative collaborative, and particularly to director Wendy Wasdahl and her co-writer Janet Sternburg and co-director Ayaz Maile, that the intractable material has yielded such lovely, indeed delectable, fruit.' (New York Native, May 1984.)

That last phrase became a fitting epitaph for the little company that soon withered on the vine—not from lack of tending or adequate nourishment, but because, as one character in the play philosophized, everything in life has a time and an end.

One final amusing anecdote should be added as a reminder that at Shared Forms, no matter how seriously they seemed to take their responsibilities, there was always that humorous, slightly ditsy quality about the two founders that was never far below the surface. Wendy, writing for them both, sent me a thank-you letter after receiving a check one spring, noting the timeliness of the grant and what immediate projects it would be applied to. But somehow, it got mislaid in the maelstrom that was the top of her desk, then forgotten in the distractions of summer. It wasn't until the fall, when the desk was pulled out for a thorough housecleaning, that the check was discovered in a welter of dust balls, wedged behind the radiator. She remembered misplacing it then, of course, but by that time it was like a brand-new contribution, and she felt, well, twice-blessed. We in turn felt we had come upon the sure-fire repeat formula for the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

The second group Bob Moss wanted to be sure would be well looked after when he departed Forty-second Street was also one whose work was heavily influenced by music. But this time, young composers were recruited to join in the collaborations from the start, not necessarily writing songs or arias to be sung, but creating appropriate sounds to fuse with spoken dialogue in ongoing explorations of new forms of musical theater. Elements of dance, video, and architecture were incorporated the same way. The emphasis was on the totally integrated creative process, so it was called, appropriately enough, Creation. The Creation Production Company, to give it its full, if somewhat presumptuous title, was founded in 1975 by writers/directors Matthew Maguire and Susan Mosakowski, along with Andreas Nowara, and a coalition of directors, choreographers, writers, and visual artists. Incorporated in 1977 as a not-for-profit theater company, its express purpose was to concentrate on experimental and original works. It was to remain primarily a production company, although in time a core of actors was involved, as well as composers. Vito Ricci was the principal composer-in-residence, but others included Clodegh Simonds, Glenn Branca, Rashied Ali, Brian Eno, Philip Johnston, Wayne Horvitz, and Rubin Holcomb. Maguire also worked with Philip Glass and Molissa Fenley for Australia's 1986 Adelaide Festival.

The idea of forming his own theater company came to Maguire, literally, as a bolt from the blue (or, as we jokingly told it, as if he was struck dumb on the road to Damascus). He was working as an actor then, which meant he had plenty of leisure time to browse in bookstores, and one spring day came upon a "collage" novel by Max Ernst, *Une Semaine de Bonté*. Ernst himself had been a great experimenter—best known as the German-born French artist who was a seminal figure in both the Dadaist and surrealist movements in the 1920s, he had a remarkably varied career. He invented frottage (pencil rubbings of objects) and later experimented with grattage (the scraping or troweling of pigment from a canvas), and in prison camp during World War II, he worked with decalcomania (pressings on canvas of pigment-covered surfaces like glass or paper). He immigrated to the United States in 1941 with the help of the heiress Peggy Guggenheim, whom he married a year later, then returned to France in 1953, dying in Paris in April 1976.

Matthew said of the experience, "I was struck by Zen lightning. I could see clearly how just by staging the collage images exactly as they were, I would have a play."

He developed it into something he called *THE SEVEN DEADLY ELEMENTS*, and Ellen Stewart, with her

inexplicable and unfathomable reckoning, decided it was worth doing after he told her about it, even though he had never created anything before. She gave him a slot at La MaMa, and a new career was launched, simple as that.

“It’s never been that easy since,’ he admitted, “but I was hooked. My motto’s become ‘You never know what’s going to happen.’” And it didn’t take him long to learn that ‘theater is a field in which one’s ability to respond instantly to the unpredictable is the skill most crucial for survival.’ For someone who didn’t start out to be an actor, here in one stroke he’d become an actor, writer, and director of his own theater company, as well as a protégé of an Off Off Broadway legend.

Matthew Maguire was born in Troy, New York, in 1952. Beginning in his first year at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, he found himself acting in five plays a semester, prompting his parents to worry that he wasn’t getting a balanced education. They gave him an ultimatum: unless he changed courses, they would not continue paying for his tuition. But the bug had bitten. He quit, went off to New York City, and enrolled in New York University’s School of Drama, as well as study with Stella Adler, paying his own way.

Susan Mosakowski was born in Utica, New York, in 1951 to second-generation Americans of Polish and Lithuanian descent. At five, she was singing show tunes and dancing, but by her early teens, she’d switched emphasis to painting. At nineteen, she “took a left turn, pursued choreography, and a few years later came to New York.” She, too, entered New York University’s School of the Arts when the foremost movers and shakers of the avant-garde theater scene were in residence: Joseph Chaikin, Richard Foreman, Andrei Serban, Twyla Tharp, Meredith Monk, and Robert Wilson. Susan met Matthew there a year before graduating. They found they had similar slants on what theater should (and shouldn’t) be, and knew that in order to realize it, they would have to do it themselves—together. They called their collaboration Creation.

Unlike Shared Forms, Creation Production was a gypsy outfit. It worked from a loft on Greene Street in Soho but never had a permanent theater of its own. In the course of the next couple of decades, however, it managed to be invited to perform in most of the prestigious downtown venues: La MaMa, St. Clement’s, Performing Garage, Theater for the New City, Ohio Theatre, and Westbeth Theater, to name some.

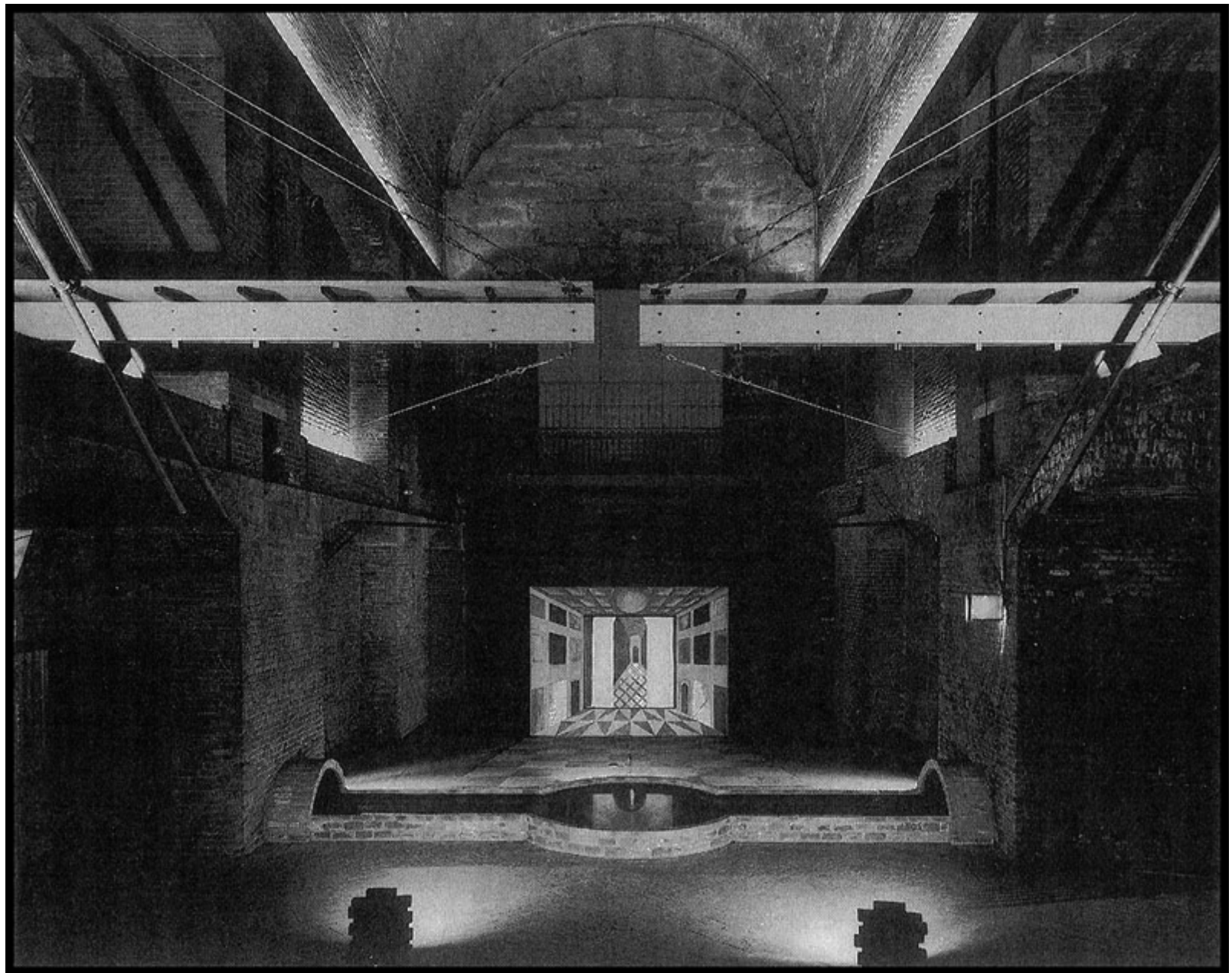
SEVEN DEADLY ELEMENTS explored collage—the transforming of the commonplace into the surreal by combinations of unlikely materials—as a technique for performance. Maguire’s next piece, UNTITLED (THE DARK AGES FLAT OUT), was a play set in a landscape inspired by the enigmatic miniature worlds that artist Joseph Cornell fashioned in his celebrated “boxes.” It was begun as a commission from Bob Moss’s Arts in Education Program, and became one of the few works Maguire acted in. Tall, slender, and actor-handsome, with a perpetually bemused look that could be read as cocky self-assurance or feigning confidence in perpetually expected disaster, he was the perfect type to play one of his invented cool characters; in this instance, a character writing a drama about a man going blind who, in turn, sees with his mind a play about the fear of blindness and the paradox of clarity. It was played out within open skeletal enclosures five-feet square by seven-feet high, made of nailed two-by-fours—the Cornell boxes. Several had backs covered with stretched paper like shoji screens that emitted light from behind and against which the shadows of the performers, lit from in front, gave the illusion of being overcrowded with bodies; one had a window at the back suspended in the space where the others had “walls,” that became at once a forbidding barrier and an entree into what lay beyond. As with all Creation’s works, it was densely cerebral and confounding to me; to critics as far flung as Baltimore and Amsterdam, it was also ‘enlightening,’ “maverick,” “antic,” “obstinately original,” and “thrilling.”

It was also fraught with all sorts of physical dangers for the performers because of the athletic staging. Maguire: “We were on tour at the Washington Project for the Arts doing ‘Untitled.’ I performed it with Vito Ricci who also composed the music. The continuous score of music and text was on tape, so if the tape stopped the show stopped. Vito and I were in the middle of our fight choreography, bashing at one another with chairs—the author and the characters fighting for supremacy—when all of a sudden the tape hit a glitch.

For an instant, I lost my concentration, turning my head upstage to the tape recorder, thinking, ‘Oh, my God, there goes the show!’ Vito’s chair came crashing down on my head. I went down. I popped right back up, but I was seeing stars. Vito had this horrified look on his face, but I motioned him to pretend that it didn’t happen. Easier said than done. I had to keep making little unplanned side trips upstage to wipe the blood off my forehead so that the audience wouldn’t panic. You never know what’s...”

Because the show relied so heavily on the recorded score, it was only a matter of time before more electronic mishaps occurred—”One time with the same show, we left the theatre a half hour before curtain just to get some air. When we got back fifteen minutes later, the tape recorder was gone, stolen. After the shock and horror sunk in, we had no time to grieve. We rushed to Vito’s home studio, got two back-up decks, and the myriad master tapes. The performance started ten minutes late, and Vito pulled off the heroic task of remixing live in between his other actions as a character, a real trouper.”

Unlike McBrien and Wasdahl of *Shared Forms*, Maguire and Mosakowski’s 1985-1986 *THE BRIDE AND HER EXTRA-RAPID EXPOSURE* (the first of her *BRIDE/BACHELOR* trilogy) continued their joint fascination with melding the visual and performing arts. Inspired by Marcel Duchamp’s tongue-in-cheek composition, she created a stop-motion tale of the Bachelor’s hermetic journey through a mechanical landscape in pursuit of a Bride who would never marry. On tour, when it was performed in the sculpture court of the



THE MEMORY OF GIULIO CAMILLO (1986) by Matthew Maguire
Creation Production Company

Photo by Peter Bellamy

Minneapolis Institute of Art, it was hailed as ‘wonderfully thought-provoking, highly imaginative...utterly fascinating and beautiful.’ (*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*)

Susan appeared less and less as a performer, devoting most of her future time to writing and directing plays. But when she did take on a role, she showed a stunning stage presence: tall, erect, with a dancer’s grace beneath an unruly mop of short blonde hair, she was a breezy counterpart to her partner’s more somber mien. Her stage performances were as fraught with unexpected accidents as Matthew’s. One section of her 1980 piece WHITE/BLACK had to be in a totally darkened set, through which projected phosphorescent lines intercrossed. The same kind of lines were painted across her black body suit, so that when she moved, it was visually very effective—but only in total blackness. The show was taken on tour to Europe, and when it played the Melkweg in Amsterdam (a city where hashish was sold legally), the audiences, carried away with the psychedelic nature of the staging, began lighting up their hash pipes; and so, after two days spent blocking out every speck of light from the theater, the effect was shattered as she was compelled to finish the scene in a sea of tiny, smoky spotlights.

Among the growing number of varied pieces Creation Production developed, including THE AMERICAN MYSTERIES (1982-1983), BERENICE (1985-1986), PROPAGANDA (1986), and THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (1987), were two radio plays by Peter Handke: THE RIDE ACROSS LAKE CONSTANCE (1978) and RADIO PLAY (1983-1984), both performed over Station WBAI.

But the most fascinating, and, to me, the most successful of Creation’s productions wedded architecture with performance in site-specific works like BABEL IN BABYLON, by Maguire, where words were the building blocks for the Tower of Babel. It was performed at the Belvedere Castle in Central Park, co-produced by En Garde Arts, an exclusively site-specific production company directed by the highly imaginative Anne Hamburger that will be discussed in a later chapter.

The culmination was the presentation of THE MEMORY THEATRE OF GIULIO CAMILLO, the piece alluded to in the opening pages of this book as performed within an anchorage of the Brooklyn Bridge—certainly the most unique setting for a production in all of New York, if only temporarily. Creation’s work was always highly visual in nature. The sets for its productions were defined as works of architecture and sculpture. But here the environs were the determining factor. And what a dramatic factor it was!

When the Brooklyn Bridge opened to the public for the first time on May 24, 1883, it was declared the greatest engineering feat of the nineteenth century. The longest suspension bridge of its time, it was also the first to employ steel in the construction of its wire cables. The building of the East River bridge was a drama in itself. Its designer, the brilliant John Roebling, died from a wound suffered while surveying for the structure before it was even begun. His son, Washington A. Roebling, took up his father’s task, which occupied the next fourteen years of his life, and was injured himself. Like many others who worked in the caissons to reach the bedrock on which the towers would rest, he fell victim to the bends. Thereafter confined to his room, the job of supervising the monumental undertaking went to Washington’s wife, Emily, who fulfilled it admirably. When it was finished, she was awarded the honor of being the first person to cross it, which she did in a flag-bedecked carriage toting a hen under one arm for good luck. (President Chester A. Arthur was the first dignitary to walk across.)

The interiors of the Anchorages—so-called because they anchored the cables that kept the superstructure suspended—were as cathedral-like as the outer design. Inside the Brooklyn anchorage were eight vaulted chambers, no two the same size, and of varying heights, built above where the anchor was buried in the stonework. They had not been designed for show. Roebling intended them to be functional. He figured that their great strength might make them suitable depositories for gold bullion. On a second level, they had been left open on all sides, perhaps to contain an open market, which never materialized. And so from the early part of the twentieth century, it remained a playground for neighborhood kids until World War II, when the arches were all bricked in to form an entirely enclosed space.

After the war, the anchorage was commandeered to store tires for municipal vehicles (while its opposite number on the Manhattan side was divided up into artists' and sculptors' workshops), and it remained a storage bin until 1983, when, to commemorate its centennial, the Brooklyn anchorage was restored in homage to the Roeblings, and subsequently played host to many special events, including annual art exhibits sponsored by Creative Time, one of the producers of MEMORY THEATRE.

THE MEMORY THEATRE OF GIULIO CAMILLO was a stylized portrait of the sixteenth century Italian architect who seriously attempted to focus his entire memory in a single moment. Matthew Maguire had designed it to be performed in three phases: the first at La MaMa ETC in 1984, while Phase Two toured the United States; and the third in June 1986 at the anchorage. The setting was Venice in the late 1500s, and the eight bricked-over chambers of the anchorage couldn't have lent themselves more appropriately. Some were immense, with fifty-five foot barrel-vaulted ceilings, while others were much smaller, even claustrophobic, and they led into each other in such a way that it was impossible to determine their dimensions until well inside the openings. This added surprise and the same sense of labyrinthian intrigue that pervades every turn of Venice's sinuous canal system. In one chamber, a simulated section of the canal seemed to run through it, dividing the viewers from players, who at various times immersed themselves in it, emerged like primordial creatures from it, and dallied with their contorted reflections that disfigured the surface of it like Francis Bacon portraits.

Each chamber represented a different segment of Camillo's memory as slow tableaux were consecutively enacted in them, and the audience moved from one to another accordingly like a live pulsating vein connecting the abstract "thoughts." Eerie music composed by Vito Ricci followed the proceedings everywhere, now to dramatically underscore the lowering of a pair of opposing overhead drawbridges that met in the middle of the largest chamber forming a passageway for the players, and now to highlight the splash of a thin waterfall penciling down a step-back wall beside ladders leading to the upper landings under an arched firmament hung with a dull red moon. Ladders, crisscrossed before a performer, or extended to great heights, or clustered in different lengths against the walls, were the prevailing motifs of the piece, and orbs in all sizes and materials were used as focal features, along with black and white tiled expanses of floor painted in such deep perspective that their vanishing points seemed a mile away. The musical score integrated with the spoken lines and then replaced them in the mime sequences. (It was taped and broadcast during separate exhibitions of the installations on the afternoons of the first week.)

The plots of each memory sequence were as enigmatic and amorphous as dreams, leaving the viewers to derive individual meaning from them. But some players were recognizable as stock characters out of traditional *Commedia dell'Arte* theater: Arlequino (Mic Woicek); Columbina (Karla Barker); Isabella (Nadja Smith); Francescina (Constance Crawford); Pulcinella (Rob Elk); and Pantalone (Christopher McCann, who doubled as Giulio Camillo). The costumes by Helena Carratala, and masks and objects by Richard Curtis were sumptuously reminiscent of the period, and the lighting design by Pat Dignan, much of it indirect, enhanced the varied architectural details of the anchorage superbly.

On the June evening when my guests and I approached the entrance to the anchorage, the sky was still bright blue above the setting sun, and made the famous network of cables high over our heads sharper and somewhat menacing as it diminished to a fine web of hairs at the double gothic arches in the distance. Inside, we were plunged into another climate and time zone. The outside eighty-degree temperature gave way to a chill midnight so dark it took several moments to accustom our eyes. Early arrivers had already seated themselves in the first chamber in a prearranged semi-circle of metal folding chairs. The smart ones, who had remembered to bring along sweaters and jacket, were pulling them on and turning up collars.

They were not the only ones affected by the penetrating cold. Matthew and his cast and crew learned after the first day to carry along winter-weight practice clothes and even overcoats to rehearsals. The inner chambers were outsized ice boxes when first entered. Reverberating sounds were also an unexpected problem.

Seven teams of architects and artists built eight different installations while rehearsals went on simultaneously, so movement in one chamber might be restricted to maneuvering around crouching bricklayers, while in another, commedia routines might be continually interrupted by the on-and-off roar of a rotary saw.

“After you’re rehearsed an acrobatic scene with actors in overcoats next to a screaming table saw,” Maguire remembered, “you know you’ve reached the highest level of concentration.” He went on to complain that the din of traffic overhead was far more pronounced inside the chambers, and played an unwelcomed counter drone to Ricci’s balanced musical tonalities.

Then, of course, like other famous structures with chaotic pasts, there were the attendant ghost stories that clung to its history like wisps of tattered gauze and spooked the players every time a hammer dropped or a gust of dry air rattled the scenery; tales of workmen buried beneath the floor, who had tumbled from great heights or been crushed by granite slabs; of others who were suffocated in the caissons or agonized by the bends—still moaning for their day of retribution.

When all the audience had assembled around the semi-circle, the great outer door was closed and Maguire prefaced the play with an ingratiating little speech that explained his intentions—to “chart a course through memory and metaphorically dissect moral amnesia in America.” There was an uneasy titter in the crowd and a shrugging of shoulders, like, Wha-a-a? I gathered he was striving to intertwine events and processes of the external political world with the self-reflective process of making art. But who knew? We were encouraged to wander at will through the installations—back to Shared Forms’ DAILY MINIMUM REQUIREMENT—partaking of events as they occurred in sequence, or not.

The sculptural/architectural installations designed for the MEMORY THEATER production were pretty remarkable in themselves. The “draw” bridge, already described, by Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scifidio, and the “canal” beneath it framed a distant panel painted, de Chirico style, to represent the far end of a palace room in deep perspective, with a central arched aperture giving onto a long, narrow loggia. At one point in the performance, two young women, their feet locked under wrungs of the ladder-like bridges, hung upside down from their knees, letting their flared skirts fall back down around their bodies and heads like gently swaying lamp shades. Warm-toned bricks, like the rest of the interior, were the basic material used in most of the constructions. A carved stone face, fifteen-feet up a bricked wall spat a solid stream of water down into a half-round brick basin, splintering the silence in the chamber design by Elyn Zimmerman and George Palumbo. Kip Yin Snyder invented a monumental brick “throne” fit for a pharaoh, flanked by two square brick columns, while Laurie Hawkinson’s playfully Klee-inspired “camera obscura” periscoped light off angled mirrors to illuminate patches of an enlarged sixteenth century scientific engraving behind it.

Maguire: “I walked into the chamber. There I heard a man say softly, ‘A warning...there will be a scream.’ I looked for the source of his voice and what loomed in my vision was a large box like a camera obscura perfectly made of wood and without its front face. Inside, a woman was sitting on nothing, her back against the shadows of the back wall. She was breathing deeply. In front of the box standing almost motionless were Arlequino and Pantalone. The woman in the shadows began a hideous scream as if she were trying to rip out her bowels. The two comedians did a lazzo, my favorite lazzo [GAG]. I laughed even as my skin was crawling. That same voice—the man must have been cleverly hiding just out of my view—said, ‘The present moment.’”

The purpose of “architectural performance,” according to Maguire, was another attempt to find the “pure presence,” which Deconstructionist Jacques Derrida defined as a “concept independent of language.” That and other ponderables were included in a published treatise Matthew Maguire wrote under the heading, “Architectural Performance.” About MEMORY THEATRE, he added, “A curtain opens on a proscenium the height of a sixteenth-century man. Giulio Camillo crosses the stage past an arched door. A plain, straight-backed chair faces the door. There are no shadows. Camillo turns and addresses the audience, ‘The ship is sailing.’ The curtain closes. And opens again. Camillo has vanished. The chair remains. It now casts a large shadow. Absence...or presence?”

The audience that night left the anchorage with as many questions as answers but visually impressed by a production few would forget.

On the subject of absence and presence, Matthew said he always thought of our first encounter, when he was experiencing an absence of necessary funds to keep him, Susan, and their tiny daughter, to say nothing of Creation Productions, on any kind of firm footing, and my unsolicited presence came to the rescue: “One of the warmest memories I have is that phone call from you telling us of our first grant. The circumstances were so odd—no application, no meeting, no knowledge of you at all for that matter—that I was unable to get my skeptical family to believe that it was true. My father insisted that I must have been talking to some kind of con man on the phone. ‘Five-thousand dollars out of the blue? Impossible!’ That event had a profound impact upon me. Now, no matter how grim things get, I still have faith that it’s possible that manna will drop from heaven.” (There was an early television series about an unseen millionaire who in each episode gave an enormous sum of money to unexpected recipients, and commented in voice-overs about the ensuing tales of what they did with it. Based on my low visibility, people in the theater community who equated me with the Foundation began referring to me as “the reluctant millionaire.”)

Maguire’s motto held up then too—YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT’S GOING TO HAPPEN!

The next most unexpected setting for a theater was a striking nineteenth century cast-iron structure on the Lower East Side that remained surprisingly intact and uncorrupted by the architectural and human rubble that time and circumstance heaped up around it on one of New York’s most notorious thoroughfares—the Bowery. Rising five stories high at the intersection of Bond Street, it was, then and later, one of the tallest buildings around, designed by Henry Englebert and completed in 1874 to house the Bond Street Bank. The presence of an elegant bank in the middle of Skid Row seemed a rude anachronism in the 1960s, but at the time of construction, it was within the upper reaches of a still-fashionable and affluent section of the city that bordered the then-thriving theater district centered around Broadway and Warren Street, where the grand Park Theatre had been erected in 1798. To show how history repeats itself, there is even evidence of a defunct church having been converted into a theater nearby as far back as 1808. Called the Lyceum, it offered a mixed bag of entertainments dismissed by one sniveling contemporary critic as “amusements for vulgar minds.” (It seems also to have undergone as many name changes as successive years it remained in business—from Lyceum to the Amateur, the Theatre of Arts, the Columbin, and Washington—before being demolished a decade later.)

By 1900, however, the neighborhood had changed drastically. The affluent residents migrated north to Chelsea and Murray Hill and were replaced by predominantly German immigrants who turned it into a flour-milling center. The Bond Street Bank became the German Exchange, and after its demise at the outset of World War II, the building was alternately vacant and leased to small, low-margin industries for the next twenty years when, from negligent upkeep, the exterior suffered considerable paint loss and damage to its fine details.

Conferring Landmark Status on it in 1967, the City of New York Landmarks Preservation Commission indicated some of those details in its designation report: “Tiers of stately Corinthian and Ionic columns; ornate medallions under the roof cornices; and elegant entranceway guarded by paneled cast iron newel posts.” In short, a cast-iron wedding cake, its modular panels precast and bolted to a heavy brick and timber frame—a method of construction first used at the time of the Civil War, which became a radical precursor of modern skyscrapers. The old bank, the Commission report continued, was in the rich French Second Empire Style, “in every way a supreme example of the type.”

A young woman named Honey Becker happened upon the now-faded and peeling edifice one day in 1962 and fell in love with it. So much so that she and her husband Bruce soon bought it with the intention of transforming it into a legitimate theater. She was a vivacious blonde in her mid-thirties then, and already a profes-

sional actor. The Beckers were currently running the renowned Tappan Zee Playhouse (Helen Hayes' home theater) in Nyack, New York, in summer, and Bruce had designed two Manhattan theaters—the Maidman and the Village South (later called the Vandam and the one-time base of the Film Forum).

Ignoring the derelicts sprawled on the steps of the bank building, or urinating through the iron railing surrounding it, the Beckers began renovation in 1963, Honey bicycling over every day from where they lived on Waverly Place in the West Village, a block away from me. The first obstacle to eliminate was a seventy-five-ton bank vault that took up all of the center of the first floor interior. It was a granite behemoth one-and-a-half stories high with four-foot thick walls and three heavy doors (but no cash!), and took one week to dismantle and cart away after repeated futile attempts to sell it off intact as an antique curio.

The original wooden Victorian arches and fifteen-foot high doors of the vestibule were scraped and re-varnished. Newly installed chandeliers highlighted the rippled silk moire that was pasted on the walls. An old teller window was made into a splendid box office front. The area beyond the vestibule was transformed into an eighteen-foot high theater decorated in royal purple and lavender, accommodating one-hundred-eightythree raked seats upholstered in purple velour.

The proscenium stage had an unusual depth of twenty-six feet and boasted the only turntable mechanism Off Broadway, as well as three complete light boards (borrowed from Nyack). A spiral staircase from the Old Shubert Theater cork-screwed down to two spacious dressing rooms and a patrons' lounge in the basement. There were no bad sight lines in the cozy theater, and the central aisle was made wide enough for actors to use for entrances and exits.

Outside, the Landmark exterior was painted a gleaming white and a black wrought-iron gate was installed across the foot of the steps to discourage further vagrant occupation. (At first, Honey hired some of them for odd jobs, and a few stayed on to work backstage later; but she gave up the idea eventually, realizing that their presence was making patrons uneasy.) As a last touch, a new black and white sign reading the Bouwerie Lane Theater (she had resorted to the original Dutch spelling) was hung out, swaying gently over the heads of the first theatergoers who ascended the steps on November 6, 1963, for the premiere performance—a revival of *THE IMMORALIST*, a play by Ruth and Augustus Goetz, based on the autobiography of André Gide, originally produced on Broadway in 1954 at Billy Rose's theater, the Royale, starring Geraldine Page, Louis Jourdan, and a very young James Dean.

The show was only moderately successful due, in part, to indifferent reviews, teaching the Beckers the first lesson in Off Broadway economics: in an out-of-the-way place like the Bowery, only productions that got good notices drew audiences; the others were ignored. On the other hand, they found that if they could keep a show running beyond six weeks, there was a slim chance of turning a tiny profit, comparable, say, to that of the local liquor stores which, considering the neighborhood, wasn't too bad.

After several years of discouraging attendance, Honey decided to lease the theater out. Stacy Keach and his brother James produced *JESSE JAMES* there with sets designed by Robbie Anton, of whom more will be told in Chapter Ten. Local associations held social functions in the elegant jewel-box interior. But the Becker's dream of beginning a Theater Row in the area remained just that. The Bowery resisted all efforts at cultural renaissance; it was to look the same in 1990 as in the 1960s, except that the winos who lounged all over the sidewalks seemed younger as a group and less shy about disguising their bottles of Thunderbird—nobody bothered hiding them in brown paper bags anymore. The main theater action had moved from the West Village to East Fourth Street and beyond to Second and First Avenues, several blocks north and east of the Bouwerie Lane.

Honey Becker's moribund showcase was granted a new lease on life in 1974, though, when a determined woman named Eve Adamson negotiated to take it over full-time as the base for her three-year-old group, the Jean Cocteau Theater. A native Californian, Adamson had come to New York to study writing and choreography and had worked as artistic director of a small Fourteenth Street theater company. Also in her thirties,

with bright blue eyes, long, loose hair, and a straightforward manner that combined a business-like approach with a scholar's concentration, she knew exactly what she wanted to produce: experimental classical theater, which for her meant reviving classics that had no ready audience—"the so-called unproduceable plays."

She called her company the Jean Cocteau Theater in honor of the French playwright and actor who died in 1963, whom she admired as a "twentieth-century Renaissance man who lived and worked under the assumption that all things constitute theater. He believed and proved that outrageous art is art reduced to its classic elements." But the name created problems from the outset. Many were under the impression that she presented only his plays, and in French; others confused the name with that of another Frenchman, the marine explorer Jacques Cousteau, whose underwater documentary films were currently very popular (at first people called to inquire when the next deep-sea features began).

Before moving into the Bouwerie Lane, the Jean Cocteau had presented such little-known works as Calderon's *LIFE IS A DREAM*, and Michel de Ghetderode's *CHRISTOPHE COLOMBE*, in a former printing shop a block away on Bond Street. Having worked in children's theater in California, Adamson hit early on the idea of introducing classics to school-age pupils. After conferring with teachers in the New York public schools, she presented productions that were currently being studied in classes, arranging for busloads of students to be transported to her theater for weekday matinees followed by rap sessions with the cast and directors. It was the success of that program and the need for a bigger space to accommodate all of the interested youngsters that prompted her to seek out the Bouwerie Lane, though she'd had her eye on it ever since moving into the neighborhood. When she finally got a look inside, she knew it was the right place: even the glass globes lighting the walls rested on brass stems that became miniature women's faces framed in wavy hair, reminding her of Cocteau's great film, *Beauty and the Beast*, where the corridors of the Beast's castle were lit by candles held by real arms protruding from the walls.

If any of the structures described in this chapter affected what was presented in them more than the Bouwerie Lane did, it was not because they were initially more suitable. The players moved in, lock, stock, and pussy-cats, and immediately set about expanding the program series to six productions a year, resulting in the only repertory company in New York at the time that was a true repertory (the Circle Rep didn't present plays in rotation after its first year). The company quickly adapted all of its plays to the existing stage space as if it was designed for them. But the quality of the largely amateur acting left something to be desired, prompting critic Bruce Adgate to write in 1975, "This young company has bitten off more than it can chew, let alone swallow. (Its) real responsibility to its audience is quality and not quantity"

Getting qualified actors who would work for nothing was always a problem. They had to be non-Equity, first of all, since no repertory company could function under the Union's prevailing terms limiting Off Off Broadway runs from twelve to sixteen performances without recompense. The players—there were twelve eventually, with four or five apprentices—required extraordinary stamina to be able to hold down full-time outside jobs to support themselves, then average fifty intensive hours a week at the theater doing everything from making costumes and sets to preparing mailings, from ticket-taking to cleaning the premises, and rehearsing two or more plays at the same time. After the move to the Bouwerie Lane, they each began receiving a stipend that increased in small increments yearly, but it never was to reach the minimum two-hundred-twenty-five dollars a week that Actors Equity theaters of equivalent size were required to pay under the agreements of 1990. (Equity spokesmen continually finger-jabbed at the Cocteau in print whenever they could, calling its policy "illadvised" and hoped to raise guilt feelings by complaining that "artists shouldn't have to subsidize the art"—*TheaterWeek*, April 1990.)

The result was acting that was, to put it mildly, uneven. Some of the original members seemed to do nothing more than recite lines by rote, while others affected grotesque gestures and mannerism. One, who had been with Adamson from the start and doubled for a time as company administrator, was arguably the worst actor on any New York stage, and every one of his entrances made me cringe. His exits were a relief. But,

conversely, another, Craig Smith, who joined the company in 1972, was such a consummate actor that aficionados attended performances just to watch him handle different roles. Being rather short in stature and stocky of build, he relied heavily on extraordinary vocal flexibility and stage presence to put his portrayals across and often convinced the audience he was the tallest person around.

Smith was a born trouper and reveled in the challenge of doing several plays in a single evening. For him, it kept the work from going stale. And the more varied the parts were at any one time, the better he liked it. Once he played Davies, the tramp in Harold Pinter's *THE CARETAKER*, at an early show and then turned around and donned petticoats and a hoop skirt to become Mrs. Hardcastle in Oliver Goldsmith's *SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER* (a role not usually done in drag) later the same night. He was equally convincing at both, except one time when, after the second play, where he was identified in the playbill as "Verna Craig," the mother of another cast member went backstage and was asked what she thought of it. She said it was very entertaining, but, unaware of the cross-gender casting, wondered if that poor, homely creature playing Mrs. Hardcastle shouldn't consider a change of career. She was just too ugly for show business.

With his remarkable ability, Craig Smith could have gone on to do almost anything he wanted in the theater or films, but his choice to remain with the Cocteau was deliberate and lasting. He was still the main attraction in 1990.

Until 1988, Smith spent most of his non-acting time helping out as the troupe's publicity manager between stints of office "temp" work to make ends meet. In December 1989, at age thirty-nine, he and another company member, Elise Stone, exchanged marriage vows on stage one Monday night before an audience of one-hundred-twenty-five friends and family, but he was right back on the same spot again by the first of January in a revival of Calderon's *LIFE IS A DREAM*, playing Segismundo, the exiled prince, at one moment and, true to fashion, dashing around backstage to operate the sound and light boards the next. Being a theatrical jack-of-all-trades had its own rewards, he claimed: "Most American actors concentrate too much on their work on stage. There is nothing like a little distraction to bring a moment of ease to your work, so you don't pound your audience over the head. It keeps me in tune with the performance that day, and I also feel I am supporting the other actors."

In spite of a history of uneven productions, the Cocteau was always a place where guest directors liked to work, people like Bill Reichblum in 1988, for example, the twenty-seven-year-old associate director of the Theater For A New Audience (not to be confused with Theater of the New City). He had been an assistant to none other than Jerzy Grotowski, Andrei Serban, and Joe Chaikin. Before him, Robert Moss, having left Playwrights Horizons for his own theater in Queens, returned to direct Sheridan's *SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL*.

Writers were also pleased to have Adamson present and direct their work, despite the fact that her reputation had been made almost entirely with the classics. In 1981, an ailing Tennessee Williams became resident playwright for a time, after seeing how she directed his early works, *IN THE BAR OF A TOKYO HOTEL* (1975-1976), and the bizarre, experimental piece *KIRCHE, KUCHE, UND KINDER* (subtitled *AN OUTRAGE FOR THE STAGE*, set in Soho.)

The Cocteau presented his last play, *SOMETHING CLOUDY, SOMETHING CLEAR*. In his biography of Williams, *The Kindness of Strangers*, Donald Spoto wrote of Adamson that she offered the unexpected but welcomed professionalism, a sympathetic and sensitive approach to the play, a clear voice, and a sharp ear.

Our involvement with the Jean Cocteau Repertory began, as it did with most, in its early years at the Bouwerie Lane, when Adamson voiced an interest in expanding its scope to include experimental presentations by little-known local talent. She initiated a series of one-acters performed by the company and followed by audience question-and-answer sessions, laced with light refreshments. The regular audience was surprisingly

hostile to the intrusion of new blood, for the most part, and the post-play periods evolved as less question-and-answer than harangue-and-complain. The attempt was an eventual flop, not the least because of bad choices of material and the abysmal quality of the acting, and we all gave it up.

However, I continued to return fairly often throughout the years that followed, if only to hear the words of an obscure classical drama for the first time, or just to sit in the company of like souls in that cramped, antique darkness, luxuriating in the fellowship. It was a comforting feeling. And when an occasional burst of drunken shouting or exploding glass out on the street startled our concentration, it served as a poignant reminder of how fragile, isolated, and remarkable that little oasis of illusion was that for so long, and against such odds, had defied the grim “reality” of its setting. We’d shiver, hunker down, and pay closer attention.

Chapter Nine

Galactic Musings

The theater groups in the preceding chapter all managed to acquire permanent places to work in, however bizarre or unlikely, that in turn defined and confined their output (except Creation, which was included because of its connection with Robert Moss as part of his story and also because every temporary space it occupied was transformed into a convincing simulation of architectural permanence). They also represented a cross-section of what was happening Off Off Broadway from the early 1970s. If they could be called fixed stars in a loose theatrical galaxy, there were still others around that shone so brightly they might be called gypsy planets, tracking their own orbits and attracting satellites en route. Three of the most important of those that continued to dominate or influence experimental theater from before the 1970s through the 1980s were Joseph Chaikin and the Open Theater, Robert Wilson and the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, and Mabou Mines—none of whom had permanent homes of their own, but who lit up whatever spaces they were in at the moment with incandescent brightness.

They came of age in an era of beginnings, when American avant-garde theater was in its infancy, and there was nothing like it previously to either relate to or question—only deny. There was no gradual progression from what had gone on before, no learning absorbed from the past that could be adapted to the present as had happened in European cultures. It was a clean break from the prevailing naturalism followed by our national playwrights, without transition. Then was then. Now was now. The only previous group whose work came close to being regarded as relevant was Beck and Molina's Living Theater which was closed down by the Internal Revenue Service in 1964 for nonpayment of taxes and immediately went into exile in France.

THE OPEN THEATER

Joseph Chaikin, then a young actor bent on stardom, played the role of Galy Gay in Brecht's *MAN IS MAN* in 1962, one of the last of the Living Theater's New York productions, and for it he won his first Obie Award. He had appeared with the group on and off since 1959 and toured Europe with it in spring 1962. The previous February, however, he began meeting casually with other stage artists, besides the Living Theater members, to explore non-naturalistic methods of presentation, and soon was teaching (or rather creating, since much of it was made up as he went along) new modes of acting in workshops that included ensemble exercises and theater "games" in a rented loft. That was the precursor of the Open Theater. The new group first performed publicly at Jean Edrman's Theater of the Dance and the Sheridan Square Playhouse in December 1963; along with improvisations, there was a one-act play by first resident playwright Megan Terry called *EAT AT JOE'S*. After the Living Theater's departure, Chaikin continued acting in New York but was increasingly drawn to full-time development of his own unique style of presentation.

He had wanted to be in the theater for as long as he could remember, but until now, his goal had been that of most young thespians—to become a big star and earn enough to break away from his wretched background. He was born in 1935 in Borough Park, a mostly Jewish enclave of Brooklyn, the last of five children by parents who had left Russia and Poland respectively for Israel, met and married there, and emigrated to America. Eileen Blumenthal wrote touchingly of his early life in her definitive book, *Joseph Chaikin: Exploring at the Boundaries of Theater*, revealing the subject's confessed ambivalence toward his parents, characterizing them in retrospect as emotionally wounded people. His father, a learned Hebrew scholar, worked at an ill-paying factory job but spent most of his free time reading and studying to the exclusion of everything else including his family. His mother, disillusioned and unhappy, was a cleaning woman.

At age six, little Joseph was stricken with rheumatic heart disease and spent the next few years at home since hospital care was unaffordable. It was the beginning of a lifetime of recurring illnesses and near-brush-

es with death that would later color many of his theatrical explorations. When he was well enough to be out and around, he was taken to Madison Square Garden to see a performance of Ben Hecht's *A FLAG IS BORN*, a play about Israel's infancy, starring Paul Muni, Celia Adler, and Marlon Brando (his older brother had become active in Jewish theater and was an understudy). After that, he started a little acting company of neighborhood kids, which he did again in Florida when he was placed at age ten as a charity patient in a medical facility for children with cardiac conditions when his heart began to fail again. He remained at the clinic for two years, convinced that his parents had abandoned him to die. By the time he was ready to be discharged, his family had moved to Des Moines, Iowa, where his father taught Hebrew; they were like total strangers.

Chaikin won a scholarship to Drake University after high school and majored in drama, concentrating on the classics and Shakespeare. But, no scholar, and anxious to begin acting professionally, he quit and moved to New York, supporting himself "between assignments" with waitering and office temp, occasionally supering at the Metropolitan Opera in home productions. During his isolated youth, he found solace in classical music, and it was to continue being a lifelong love. He began taking acting classes with Herbert Berghof, Peter Kass, and Nola Chilton, and landed a few small parts in Off Broadway comedies and toured with *NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS*. He co-founded Harlequin Players, an early ensemble-oriented repertory company that presented Edna St. Vincent Millay's *ARIA DA CAPO* and Sean O'Casey's *BEDTIME STORY* before disbanding two years later.

The nameless assemblage of actors, playwrights, and directors that Chaikin attracted in 1962 were mostly former students of Nola Chilton, who had left to work with an experimental company in Israel. They met informally each week to continue her floor exercises and improvisational techniques of playmaking. Chaikin introduced his own interpretations—again, often on the spot—and before long, his workshop dominated the group's activities. This irked some members who felt that their input was being increasingly disregarded, and they quit, leaving a smaller but fiercely dedicated company nucleus. Those who lingered vowed to keep the group fluid, nonrestrictive, and prepared to follow whatever avenues seemed interesting. The one word used most frequently to describe their goals was "open," so when it came time to give it a name, this was a natural choice. But one person's Open Theater was another's Ajar, and, although all of the participants continued making important individual contributions (that would cause no end of trouble later when credits were determined), it was generally acknowledged that Chaikin was the leader and chief creative force—despite his protestations to the contrary—and that it was because of him and his workshop that they were there.

That was not an unusual situation in the avant-garde theater world of the 1960s. Almost all small non-profits professed to be communal in nature but were, in fact, dominated by one strong leader. Since it was theater of movement rather than of plot, character, and dialogue, the directors assumed authorship of the pieces developed: the Living Theater was Judith Malina and Julian Beck; the Polish Lab Theater was Jerzy Grotowski; and the Open Theater was Joseph Chaikin.

The Open Theater again performed eight consecutive Monday nights at the Sheridan Square Playhouse during the 1964-1965 season and for a week each month the next season at La MaMa, although Chaikin only directed the first week's program in October 1965 and the final week in April 1966, when he presented Brecht's *CLOWN PLAY*.

My introduction to the Open Theater was in the 1966-1967 season when it was involved in two milestone works, and the only commercial Off Broadway productions that it ever did. One was a restaged *WET ROCK* by Megan Terry that had grown out of her playwright workshop. Originally staged at La MaMa in May 1966, it was directed by Joseph Chaikin and Peter Feldman to critical acclaim. But a week or so after it opened, Terry decided to take over and redirect it herself. (Her version played the Martinique Theater the next season to generally unfavorable reviews.)

The other milestone work was *AMERICA HURRAH*, a seminal piece that proved so successful, its writer Jean-Claude van Itallie and the Open Theater were hailed widely; the play won first choice in the Critic's

Voting. Unfortunately, for van Itallie, everything he wrote later was held up to it and usually wanting. The headiness of being in their first hit show—all the press hoopla and flashing lights—had its effect on the actors, some of whom began thinking of themselves as superstars. The female members took to having their hair done regularly!

Chaikin was disgusted by the change in his players and vowed never to do another play Off Broadway. He longed to return to the protected privacy of his workshop and exercises again, safe from “public consumption.” But fate determined otherwise. The show had a smash run the next year in London (running into censorship difficulties with the Lord Chamberlain that only bolstered box office sales), an all-black New York version, and no less than four European tours between 1968 and 1973.

AMERICA HURRAH, subtitled THREE VIEWS OF THE U.S.A., was actually three one-acters meant to demonstrate how some elements of American life, embraced with great pride by some, are causes of pain in others. The first, INTERVIEW, was the only one Chaikin directed. It began with four people seeking jobs at an employment agency, talking individually to four interviewers, that ended up becoming harrowing monologues about the isolation, loneliness, humiliations, and life-threatening dangers of city life. It was a perfect vehicle for introducing the Open Theater’s ensemble techniques: from a dimly lit crowd in the background, each speaker emerged, performed a solo turn, and melted back again, joining what became, in effect, a Greek chorus that commented in unison and struck appropriate poses to indicate locales, like becoming posters on a subway wall behind actress Ronnie Gilbert’s washer-woman speech. (Gilbert, who was to be a long-time Open Theater regular, was known then as one of the Weavers, a singing group that gained fame with such hits as “Goodnight, Irene” and appearances with environmentalist/folk singer Pete Seeger.)

Chaikin made numerous changes in rehearsal to tighten the play and smooth the transitional staging and indicated revisions that van Itallie made and incorporated into the published script. But Chaikin refused to consider AMERICA HURRAH an Open Theater project, either because of his own scant involvement or because he didn’t want to be associated with the “adverse” effect it had produced on the company. It might also have been because the next two playlets outshone INTERVIEW in writing, staging, and reception.

TV and MOTEL were brilliantly directed by Jacques Levy. TV was about how three employees of a rating organization sat day in and day out in front of sets monitoring vapid programs and were eventually consumed by them. MOTEL, the last playlet, was the brightest gem of all and had an impact that I never forgot. It involved three characters—a man, a woman, and an elderly lady-owner—in a pristine motel room setting. All three were played by actors inside larger-than-life papier mâché doll figures, complete with bobbing heads and grotesque fixed grins. As the owner (with recorded voice-over by the wonderful veteran actress Ruth White) extols the virtues of her establishment—and, by extension, apple-pie, all-American values as well—the other couple copulate, scrawl four-letter words and obscene drawings all over the walls, smash objects, and eventually pull the structure down. They then gleefully exit through the audience on their foot-high platform soles, tearing each other apart as the unconcerned owner-doll pivots slowly in place like a wound-down top, still proselytizing (hers is the only spoken voice) amid deafening screeches of sirens and flashing lights. It was a devastating right-on depiction of how the concepts of mass production also include the potential for self-destruction. Van Itallie seemed to be saying that the material comforts in which we luxuriate do not make us better persons. Quite the opposite, they pander to our most beastly and indulgent inclinations.

In spite of the continuing involvement of some members of the Open Theater with the productions of WET ROCK and AMERICA HURRAH, which caused ongoing strain, Joe Chaikin went on with his workshops, presenting several improvisational performances, mostly now at benefits for political causes like Angry Artists Against the War in Vietnam. He also acted in a play written for Open Theater by Megan Terry called KEEP TIGHTLY CLOSED IN A COOL DRY PLACE, structured around the “transformation” techniques he had recently been working on with the group. In 1967, after years of developing small performance works,

Chaikin began work during that winter and spring on a full-length theater piece, again scripted by Jean-Claude van Itallie, and based on workshop attempts at evoking modern counterpoints from Bible stories. It was titled *THE SERPENT* and was a loose retelling of the beginning of the end of innocence. Partly improvisational, it was the first important Open Theater work that utilized the considerable talents of all its members, who by that time included Joyce Aaron, James Barbosa, Raymond Barry, Jenn Ben-Yakov, Shami Chaikin (Joe's sister), Brenda Dixon, Ron Faber, Cynthia Harris, Philip Harris, Jayne Haynes, Ralph Lee, Dorothy Lyman, Peter Maloney, Ellen Schindler, Tina Shepard, Barbara Vann, Lee Worley, Paul Zimet, and the current in-house playwrights, van Itallie and Megan Terry.

Chaikin's original idea was to develop a piece based on the life of Jesus. The paucity of real biographical facts and the mythic proportions of the subject appealed to him as suitable for improvisational treatment. But the more the company studied, the more it was drawn to the book of Genesis alone. The players were fascinated by its primal state; everything was a first that had no name or form until it evolved—the first man, the first woman, the first Fall, the first beast, the first murder. This promised endless possibilities for improvising. The study began to focus on origins, and the performers took to delving into related writings by such authors as Robert Graves, Albert Einstein, and Carl Jung. Joseph Campbell, the respected expert on myths, dreams, and mores, visited the workshop and offered his knowledge during the ensuing winter, as did Chaikin's friend, the essayist/intellectual Susan Sontag, who suggested playing with the God-in-Man concept for visual interpretation. Writer Paul Goodman came and shared his views on Eden, proposing that the group think of it neither as an innocent, goodly paradise nor post-Fall jungle of guilt and temptation, but simply as the very "first" place, before it was capable of being distinguished by any defining adjective—a shapeless void in which things began to miraculously take shape.

The loft where the company currently rehearsed was windowless and painted black throughout and lent itself nicely to creating that pregnant void. It was much like the other studio-theaters it occupied in time, except for the address. This one was on 14th Street near Sixth Avenue, umpteen flights up rotten stairs that wound around an indolent freight elevator, under dim, bare bulbs (that seemed to be the only things holding up the ceiling) oozing an eerie Vaseline glow that was no help at all. Once inside, there were several clumps of second-hand office furniture to circumvent before setting off across an acre of glossy linoleum.

It was roughly divided by an unbleached burlap curtain strung on wire, beyond which the audience section looked like something lifted intact from a derelict's warren. There were ancient mattresses strewn randomly, with old couch cushions and pillows in between, and, for finicky stalwarts like me, a few folding chairs and rickety bleachers. (The mattresses turned out to be the best bets in the long run, since, if the viewing got rough—and it often did—one needed only to fall backward and lay staring up into the overhead blackness for relief. It also helped, as regulars knew, to bring along a blanket to throw down first.)

The performing area was on the same level as the audience, of course, so there were times when only the heads and shoulders of the actors were visible. But it was spacious and well, if simply, lit. Audience comfort was of little concern, but there were adequate restrooms and a smoking quarter beyond, and everything (except those mattresses) looked tidy and clean. Even so, as one wag put it, La MaMa looked positively *commercial* by comparison.

There seemed to be no phone on the premises. Calls for reservations were taken by an answering service. Ads were seldom placed in newspapers, but somehow every show sold out—sold out being a relative term since technically admission was free, but it was more or less understood that a two-dollar contribution was expected up front. The unlucky souls who somehow managed to find the place, but had no previous reservations, were seldom ever admitted. Chaikin was very ambivalent, at least at first, about allowing audiences to witness what he considered private exercises, and no one was welcomed off the street. He kept admission as difficult as possible and limited only to those he could be sure were sympathetic. That drew loud accusations of elitism and will be touched on later regarding his attitude toward private contributors and funding agen-

cies.

Wonderful imagery began to develop as the company rehearsed *THE SERPENT*. A tree, formed by four women with long hair and arms extended, was encircled by a male performer slithering like a snake. Then that image was replaced by one of five males with bodies intertwined and arms bent out like branches. Their heads became that of the serpent as it seemed to move through the foliage, tongue flicking ominously. The birth of Eve was illustrated by having a woman (Tina Shepard) lie down on top of a prone man (any of several actors), face up, eyes closed. She awoke with a blood-curdling cry and wrenched herself free from him, aware of her surroundings for the first time. After accepting the first fatal apple and biting into it, she was told she was mortal by off-stage voices, only to be confused when the tree/serpent dangled many apples in front of her, asking, mockingly, “Well, have you died?”, as if what she had just heard was a lie. Her reply was another question—regarding free will—when she asked the serpent if she had the right “to listen to God and not you?”

Jean-Claude van Itallie’s spare but moving narrative was most memorable in the scene where Cain murdered Abel. Again, an off-stage voice said, “And it occurred to Cain to kill his brother. But it did not occur to Cain that killing his brother would cause his brother’s death, for Cain did not know how to kill.” The actor playing Cain then clumsily attempted to pull off an arm from the body, then a leg, and when he had finally mutilated it, he tried to put it back together again and revive his brother, and became perplexed when he found that he couldn’t.

Narrative passages were used to connect the many vivid incidents since all action on stage was mute pantomime. Most were intoned by the four women who formed a Greek chorus (Cynthia Harris, Shami Chaikin, Lee Worley, and Joyce Aaron) in the background, often davenning (rocking back and forth with eyes closed) and softly wailing between words. A critic for the London Times *Saturday Review* marveled at their utterances, “wordless, almost soundless, among the most terrifying sounds I have heard in the theatre.” Facing the audience at all times, they sometimes let loose equally frightening screams that lashed out like whips and made viewers wince.

The first sexual encounter was pure comic relief. “Begatting” became a raucous, ill-fated orgy with the company members simulating first-time encounters and getting them all wrong on center stage while around the periphery, non-specific but oddly familiar-looking animal shapes roamed, looking on. I remember a dim-witted sheep shape eating grass from Abel’s dead hand (wondrously played by Peter Maloney), and a grand, heron-like bird (Paul Zimet) reminiscent of the Talmud’s “king of kings,” Ziz, that stalked about with slow dignity, fluttering its wings and darting its head in perpetual astonishment above the writhing bodies.

Current analogies were introduced—the assassination of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, for example—and recent pertinent events. Then in the last segment of the piece, called “Old People,” everyone aged perceptively during a slow dance of death and exited singing the old, sentimental ballad “Moonlight Bay.”

The Open Theater toured *THE SERPENT* throughout Europe from May through July 1968, making appearances in Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and Denmark. Even though it was well received everywhere (it played in repertory with a companion piece called *MASKS*, a program of songs, playlets, and improvisations developed in workshops), the experience was a far from happy one for everybody. Individual members found living and working in constant cramped proximity increasingly uncomfortable. The only accommodations they could afford were sordid, the performing spaces inadequate, and traveling in second- and third-class cattle cars was tiring and demeaning. People became irritable, tempers flared, and the situation waxed highly volatile. Actors who for years had worked and lived together amicably were suddenly at each other’s throats.

Lack of money was the main culprit, in a budget that allowed for few amenities to relieve the stress. But there was something else that was insinuating itself like the core of a cancer and spreading throughout the company—envy. Jean-Claude van Itallie had been given credits in the programs as the work’s playwright. In

fact, the creative credits read: “Created by The Open Theater Ensemble, words and structure by Jean-Claude van Itallie, under the direction of Joseph Chaikin, associate director Roberta Sklar.” The other members were peeved because none of the input was attributed to them that they felt should be. They all in the course of time had contributed some individual touches including the other resident playwrights, Megan Terry and Patricia Cooper, and most of the action had been worked out in true Grotowski fashion (whom Chaikin would meet in his travels along with Peter Brook, another source of his inspirations). Resentment and frustration played havoc with company morale until everyone, including Chaikin, had to admit it was one of the worst calamities they had ever experienced. It literally tore the closely knit group apart. Paul Zimet, one of the founding members and a leading actor, recalled that the only way many of them could deal with it was to stay stoned most of the time.

After returning to New York, *THE SERPENT* was performed at the Public Theater (its official American opening was at Harvard University in January 1969), and although it had already won the 1968 Obie Award for Best Play, and Chaikin and the Open Theater got a Vernon Rice Award for Outstanding Contribution, as well as Chaikin himself receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship, there was serious talk of eliminating it from the repertory. The scars it left were just too “ghastly” (Chaikin’s words) and too deep. Chaikin was forced to try to reevaluate the author/ensemble phenomenon (van Itallie ended up with the exclusive rights, and the publisher subsequently listed his name first under “author” in the published script; the Open Theater only retained the rights to perform it without having to pay him royalties). But the best solution seemed to be to eliminate one or the other. And so in most of his later productions, that’s what he tried to do, with varying success (and failure). In *THE MUTATION SHOW* and *THE WINTER PROJECT*, for example, there was no real “playwright” participation, whereas in his close collaborations with Sam Shepard, the only performers aside from the musicians were the two of them.

Joe Chaikin had been obsessed with death and dying since his first childhood illness, and his next project dealt head-on with those and related subjects including attendant sociological, psychological, and physical ramifications. It was *TERMINAL* (1970), with Susan Yankowitz being the acknowledge playwright this time (although even here there was lingering controversy—years later she complained to me in the reading lounge of New Dramatists, where she was attending a board meeting, that she never felt she’d been “recognized properly” for her contribution). It offered observed and fantasized situations as they may have occurred in the terminal ward of a large, undefined institution—some disturbing and brutal, some comical and absurd, in a Forest-Lawn-American-Way-of-Death mode. Mythology and the nether world were also invoked, with spirits of the dead inhabiting the bodies of the dying in order to admonish the living; mourning was examined as a means of catharsis and healing. After a European tour, played with three other plays, *TERMINAL* was performed at New York state colleges and prisons—the start of an innovative program of presenting work in unlikely places—before settling into a run at the Washington Square Methodist Church.

The title proved hauntingly prophetic. Chaikin announced during that run that he wanted to restructure the troupe, drastically reducing its size which then numbered eighteen. It was the beginning of the end of the Open Theater even though it continued functioning in its abbreviated form for another three years. He chose six actors to form the nucleus: Raymond Barry, Tom LiHard, JoAnn Schmidman, Tina Shepard, Paul Zimet, and Shami Chaikin. Some of the rejected members decided to form their own company, the Medicine Show, under James Barbosa’s direction, so it was agreed the financial resources be divided in two to help support both groups. A scaled-down version of *TERMINAL* was developed along with two new works, *MUTATIONS* (1971) and the company’s final production, *NIGHTWALK* (1972). *MUTATIONS* was an examination of altered states—of how, chameleon-like, people display different aspects of themselves at different times and in different situations, and of how they react to others doing likewise; it addressed relative identities of people and things. It was also, intentionally or not, a sober reflection in hindsight of the traumatic breaking up of the company, emphasizing the necessity, however risky, of sometimes having to sacrifice a cherished but no longer essential ingredient of the whole to protect the quality of what is left. Chaikin’s own view was that

nonmaterial things, like hidebound attitudes, could have as stultifying a grasp on a person as any material entities if clung to unequivocally. *MUTATIONS* premiered in, of all places, Algeria, in August 1971, during the Open Theater's third European tour and was subsequently presented in Israel and Iran at the Shah's Shiraz Festival. Chaikin refused to accompany the others to Iran for political reasons but rejoined them in Yugoslavia where the production won first prize at the Belgrade International Theater Festival. (It later won an Obie for Best Theater Piece of 1971-1972.)

The group returned to New York in the fall and reworked the piece, changing the title to *THE MUTATION SHOW*. Now it was a madcap, yet unnerving, carnival show with freaks and geeks and characters like Kamala, the wolf-girl, taken from the study call "Wolf-Children and Feral Man" by J. A. L. Singh and Robert M. Zingg, who was captured and changed from a wild thing into a human being. In place of the original narrator, there was a barker (Shami Chaikin), herself locked into a stereotype. It was performed in the Open Theater's latest loft in the Space for Innovative Development (another converted church) on West 36th Street, then in colleges and prisons in the United States and Canada before returning for a final week at the "Tombs"—New York City's infamous Men's House of Detention. After that, the company took six months off.

When they met again, it was to discuss whether or not to resume Chaikin's workshop. After a few casual sessions, it was decided to do so, with the understanding whatever resulted would be the Open Theater's final production. The piece that developed was about wakefulness and sleep, again with no dominant author, but with contributions from Sam Shepard, Jean-Claude van Itallie, and Megan Terry. It was seen briefly in March at the Space for Innovative Development, then included in the troupe's fourth European tour in the spring of 1973, alternating in repertory with *THE MUTATION SHOW*. It wasn't given a title until just before opening night at the first stop in Zurich, Switzerland. From then on, it was known as *NIGHTWALK*.

Although none of the company's pieces had much narrative plot, *NIGHTWALK* came closest to telling a story. It followed two travelers (Tina Shepard and Paul Zimet), who may or may not have been human, as they embarked on the same journey together but observed totally different worlds. Back in New York, it was presented at St. Clement's in the autumn of 1973. It then toured the United States and Canada, and gave its, and the Open Theater's, final performance at the University of California, Santa Barbara, on the first of December.

Chaikin had threatened to throw in the towel at the ends of almost all previous seasons, so the disbanding was no surprise. But now the company's very success was proving its downfall: it was considered a virtual cultural institution which made taking risks and failing privately nearly impossible; and the touring schedule and administrative pressures left little time for new developments. At its disbanding, the Open Theater had a one-hundred-thousand-dollar-a-year budget, was subsidizing its own productions, and paying its members up to seventy-five dollars a week along with health insurance.

Joe Chaikin was always wary of accepting outside funding for fear it might "ruin us," as he told Blumenthal. Certainly, his attitude toward me as a grant giver reflected that ambivalence. At first, he would try to have someone else contact me for money. But when I insisted the artistic directors of each group deal with me directly, he acquiesced, I think grudgingly. I had the feeling he would have preferred to ignore me completely, but he was not unfriendly as long as there was a safe space between us at all times. I was invited to sit in on rehearsals, and my reactions were enlisted, but it was always with me seated alone in the third row orchestra, and he and the cast assembled center stage. He needed to have no trepidations where we were concerned, however; we recognized his genius early on and, as far as I recall, funded every show he asked us to.

As noted, he was equally guarded about audiences in general, at least initially. Despite early assertions that he believed the first obligation of contemporary theater was to entertain, it wasn't until he developed his theories about "presence"—that hard-to-define something that happens only when a live audience experiences the awareness of the performers onstage first as people, then as actors playing roles, and can relate to them in both capacities simultaneously—that he fully realized the importance of involved witnesses. He eventually

went so far as to recognize audiences as ever changing combinations of individuals whose reactions could be studied and utilized; he even experimented with allowing performers to actually touch audience members (as he'd witnessed at the Living Theater) but found it caused alienation rather than engagement and abandoned the practice.

Ten days after the last Open Theater performance, Chaikin gave an interview to Richard Toscan, assistant-chairman in the Division of Drama at the School of Performing Arts, University of Southern California, in which he expanded on the "presence" theory that he felt was the Open Theater's legacy to future generations: "To me, the interest in the theater is this thing of 'presence.' You're in that particular space in that room, breathing in that room, vibrating in that room, present in that room with all that's unequivocal about being present. That's what theater is. When I try to put it into a phrase, I say to myself, *What's the difference between a person and a picture of a person? And what's the difference between a voice and a tape recording of a voice?* And in those questions is where the matter of theater is addressed."

Chaikin returned to New York and the next phase of his career. He directed a version of the classic ELEC-TRA legend written by Robert Montgomery in collaboration with the three actors involved: Shami Chaikin and Paul Zimet from the Open Theater, and Michele Collison, a veteran of Peter Brook's company. Chaikin had repeatedly claimed he believed classics should be staged as originally intended, not tampered with or updated. But as they worked, the text by Sophocles became increasingly altered and then obscured entirely by a completely new play. This version was pared down to several one-on-one confrontations as, first, Electra became temporarily possessed of her father Agamemnon's spirit, and then again as she and her brother Orestes schemed the murder of their mother Clytemnestra, who, they had reason to believe, killed Agamemnon.

Joe Papp gave them space to rehearse at the Public Theater, and I was invited to watch one early session—alone, again, three rows back in the orchestra. But not lonely. The room was small and confined, and in no time became charged with the electricity of their performances. It was certainly one of the highlights of my "viewing" career—the nearest I've ever got to what British director Trevor Nunn deemed "the hot crucible of creation" (true, I'd been in on the developing of JUNEBUG GRADUATES TONIGHT at the Chelsea Theatre Center, but at no time could it have been described as rubbing elbows with real genius).

Michele Collison was a radiant woman, huge in every way, with cascading reddish hair that drew a curtain across her expressive face one moment and lashed out at the air like tongues of fire the next as she twirled in rage and her voice bellowed like a pipe organ. Even when she fell motionless to the floor in a tangled heap of drapery, you sensed a smoldering, latent volcano.

Paul Zimet (Orestes) was the quintessential Chaikin actor. Tall, lean, with every muscle and sinew labeled and employed, there was nothing extraneous about his body or his style—both had been honed through years of workshops to the barest essentials. I remember not being able to keep my eyes off his bony bare feet as they moved about; they seemed to chart their own course through the prickly plot. During a company break, I mentioned that he had the most expressive toes Off Broadway. He blushed and tried to hide one foot with the other, only to topple over clumsily and to general applause. His face was as versatile as his feet: long, hollow-cheeked, with deepset, brooding eyes and black hair that fell from a high forehead to the base of his neck. It was the face of an ascetic, painfully sensitive in tragedy, but equally effective in absurdist comedy or some of the near-slapstick roles he created for himself later in his own company, The Talking Band.

Shami Chaikin (Clytemnestra) was small in stature like her brother, but there the resemblance ended. Dark-complexioned, beak-nosed, and intense, she could flash a profile during rehearsal that transformed her cornered queen into a dangerously ferocious eagle caught in a snare. Like her mother, she had a lovely singing voice—full-bodied and fearless—that was used most poignantly when she intoned a Jewish dirge at the memorial service for her friend (and mine) Jane Yockel, who suffered a fatal heart attack while they were out walking on Greenwich Avenue on January 31, 1990.

Jane M. Yockel was an arts administrator extraordinaire who had long supported avant-garde dance, mu-

sic, and theater and was one of the most important people in Joseph Chaikin's life after the breakup of the Open Theater. She, with Mimi Johnson and Margaret Wood, co-founded Performing Artservices in 1971 and administered the affairs of many of the brightest luminaries of the 1970s and 1980s in the non-profit field. Their roster included Richard Foreman, Philip Glass, John Cage, Robert Ashley, Trisha Brown, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Lucinda Childs, Mabou Mines, The Talking Band, and Robert Anton. At the time when Joe Chaikin struck out on his own, he was in danger of not being able to receive funding from those of us who had been his main supporters because most foundations are set up to endow groups rather than individuals. Yockel created the "Other Theater" as a nonprofit umbrella organization that he could draw from. (Ellen Stewart and Joseph Papp also continued to be supportive in equally practical ways. Since his income was drastically reduced, they invited him to perform at La MaMa or the Public Theater, where most of his subsequent work was seen.)

ELECTRA had one week of invitational performances at the Public Theater in May 1974 and then a week open to ticket-buyers at the Theatre at St. Clement's. (It was revived two seasons later for a national tour) Joe Chaikin's next project was a major one undertaken in 1974 with playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie and performers he'd worked with before. It was called A FABLE TELLING OF A JOURNEY and ran for five weeks at the Westbeth Theater. For Chaikin, it was the first undertaking of consequence since he had become critically ill and undergone open-heart surgery in October. It proved to be good therapy but not rewarding artistically. Critics called it "recycled Chaikin," "oddly out of time," "same old routine."

A FABLE TELLING OF A JOURNEY ended its run in late November 1975, and Chaikin got his first chance since Open Theater days to act again, this time in Buchner's WOYZEK, directed with ponderous sincerity by Leonardo Shapiro and his Shaliko troupe. It ran for most of that April at the Public and was taken to the Holland Festival in June, allowing Chaikin time to regain confidence as a performer and making him eager to do more acting. After setting up his first Winter Project in 1976-1977 (with again actors, musicians, and writers collaborating on a project dealing with his obsessions with death and mourning), he wished to work again with Sam Shepard on something they would not only write, but perform, together. But that was put on hold when Chaikin fell seriously ill in early December and was hospitalized with a heart infection.

When he was able to resume activity, Chaikin began his second Winter Project that, this time, dealt with some of the basic elements of theater such as music and that pesky old subject of actor-audience relationship. By May 1978, he was strong enough to fly to San Francisco for his long-awaited collaboration with Shepard. The actual time they spent together was brief by design: Shepard, as we learned in the chapter on the American Place Theatre, was terrified of flying and disliked being in New York, and Chaikin, conversely, hated to be away from Manhattan for long but had agreed to do the traveling in order to get the project going. That it involved only them and not an ensemble of other performers helped immeasurably.

Two more different and seemingly unlike conspirators could hardly be imagined. Even though Chaikin considered him one of "his" writers, Shepard felt ill at ease at the Open Theater; he felt strongly attached to Joe Chaikin but never developed a rapport with the other members of the company and didn't exactly know how to fit in as a dramatist. He also looked to Chaikin as more of a mentor than an equal, but, nevertheless, it was he who suggested they make a play together soon after the closing of the Open Theater, and they had exchanged letters discussing the subject of the piece. Shepard came up with the title: TONGUES.

Chaikin's previous work had featured few words set to a lot of movement, whereas Shepard's was just the opposite. But surprisingly, they found an instant rapport. They had both been listening for a long time to the same inner voice and reacting accordingly, if differently. Consolidating ideas was not only easy, it was a great joy, even if the major subject they kept returning to was dying. They began with one character—a man recently dead who had lived many lives—and created stories about those lives. As the work progressed, that concept became less obvious, for other ideas came to mind about totally different things, as diverse as what they ate that morning for breakfast or what experiences they had together the night before. One thought led

to another, and then to incorporating music in the piece. Shepard hadn't collaborated with anyone like this since his American Place days and the one play he wrote with Patti Smith, COWBOY MOUTH. But he had been composing music and appearing in his own work all along—in fact, it was as an actor that he was discovered by Hollywood and had by now become a bona fide movie star with several commendable film performances to his credit. Once the decision was made to include music, their roles as performers took definite form: Chaikin would be the “narrator,” and Shepard, the “musician.” As the different voices developed, so did the corresponding musical accompaniment, to the point where it became impossible to isolate any specific contributions each of them made. Music, which involved them both deeply in their separate lives, was the device that cemented together the disparate facets of plot they were honing.

Joseph Chaikin became ill again while they were collaborating. The truth was that he had never really recuperated from his previous attack, and the intensity with which he threw himself into the project only exacerbated his condition. But the piece took shape remarkably quickly, and they decided to present a few performances in San Francisco. It ran five nights at the Magic Theater, and the name of the theater told it all. I was there. Chaikin sat center stage on a high-backed chair facing the audience under a bright spot. He wore a blue workman's shirt, open at the neck, and there was an Indian-design blanket spread over his lap and legs. Shepard was back-to-back behind him, crouched on a low platform and hidden by a dark cloth draped over the chair back. He could only be partially seen from a seat on the far end of the front row, but as he banged on the various objects before him, his arms rose and fell, turning Chaikin now into a crab, then into a multi-limbed Buddha. From my far end, front-row seat, their profiles were marvelous studies in contrast: the one in the pin spot, pasty-cheeked and jowled, with an ex-prize fighter's snub nose and soft lips; the one in shadow, a sharply chiseled silhouette bobbing over an odd assortment of bongos, African drums, maracas, cymbals,



TONGUES/SAVAGE LOVE 1979-80
Joseph Chaikin, with Harry Mann (sax), Skip LaPlante (bass)

Photo By Thomas Victor

interspersed with kitchen bowls and gadgets, as long slivers of hair flew up like flame-licks. Two lone figures, center stage, together mixing all the ingredients needed to make theater magic. Only they were aware that one of them was again dangerously ill, and each performance might be the last.

Chaikin returned to New York in mid-July a very sick man, and within days underwent his second open-heart operation. As he healed, he taught a few workshops at the Center for Theater Practice, and by January 1979, was strong enough to resume the Winter Project that resulted in RE-ARRANGEMENTS, a study of how people did—or didn't—connect emotionally with each other, that was given a slot at La MaMa in March with only a dozen players participating. Before parting, he and Shepard had discussed doing another collaboration when Chaikin felt better. So in August, Joe returned to San Francisco, and they began work on a piece about love that they titled SAVAGE/LOVE. It became a companion to TONGUES, and under that title, the two one-acters were presented at the Public Theater in New York the next November, initially for a three-week run, then extended by popular demand into the following January.

TONGUES had to be my all-time favorite Chaikin show, and one we were most proud to sponsor. I saw it a number of times at the Public, once when Shepard, who had been replaced by Skip LaPlante (who wrote the music for SAVAGE/LOVE), stood against the wall near me trying to look inconspicuous in the dark (he was already a recognizable film star). But he couldn't help beating a tattoo with his fingers on his thigh and jerking his head as his rhythms filled the air. I was told this was another of his rare visits to New York, only to spend every night in the audience watching the show. He wrote a capsule description of it in long hand that was photocopied and incorporated into the playbill:

SAVAGE/LOVE AND TONGUES

In a way, both of these collaborations are an attempt to find an equal expression between music and the actor. They are environments where the words and gestures are given temporary atmospheres to breath(e) in, through sound and rhythm.

Thematically, the two pieces offer small facets of bigger questions. Shifting impulses around ideas of voices, love, death, etc. We felt no urgency to tie these facets together or force them to tell a "story," but simply to present them as parts of a whole. Even so, connections somehow arise and a story seems to be told.

Sam Shepard

As the two collaborators had different feelings about music—Chaikin loved classical music above all else, Shepard was a product of the rock-and-roll era—so their approaches to the subject of love contrasted greatly. The common ground was how love ended up, again in desolation, loneliness, hurt, and inevitably, death. But the bleakness of the text was tempered by humor that escaped like steam from under the lid of a boiling kettle when the pressure rose. In fact, for me, it was the short bursts of humor that made the work palatable. There were lines like the one where a love-starved man told of his preparation for the appearance in his life of a possible, as yet unknown lover, by "dyeing my hair brown for you, and I haven't even met you."

The music for SAVAGE/LOVE was played by composer Skip LaPlante and Harry Mann, adding a saxophone, clarinet, flute, and whistles (to underscore funny lines), as well as a double bass, to the previous assortment of percussion instruments.

At some point, I must have expressed my enthusiasm about TONGUES to Joe or Jane Yockel, for not long after the end of January 1980, when it closed, I received a small, flat box in the mail, unmarked except for the return address of his Westbeth apartment. Inside was a privately made tape of one of the first performances, complete with heavy breathing and muffled laughter and penciled side descriptions. It joined a small, floating collection of things I couldn't be without, and every time it was replayed, there were new discoveries to



TOURISTS AND REFUGEES (1980)

Ronnie Gilbert, Paul Zimet, Tina Shepard, Will Patton, Atsumi Sakato

be made.

The Winter Project continued for seven seasons. After RE-ARRANGEMENTS, there was TOURISTS AND REFUGEES, on the theme of stability and wandering, that played at La MaMa in the summer of 1980, after Chaikin's return from Europe with a tour of TONGUES (directed, as previously, by Robert Woodruff). In 1981, there was TOURISTS AND REFUGEES NO. 2, on basically the same theme but with a new structure and some new dialogue. That, too, was presented at La MaMa, and by now Chaikin was making sure that the program credits were thoroughly detailed and accurate. At the top of the playsheet was this explanation:

This piece was developed collaboratively by this year's Winter Project, an ongoing theatrical investigation organized by Joseph Chaikin in 1977. Participants come from other New York groups and from as far away as Canada and Holland. They meet for approximately three months each year to work together. TOURISTS AND REFUGEES NO. 2 was conceived and developed by the director, actors, musicians, set designer, along with dramaturg Mira Rafalowicz, and with the aid of Steven Reisner and Ruth Kreshna, who were at all stages part of the directorial team. Mary Brecht provided costume elements from which many ideas took form; Beverly Emmons designed the lighting when the play was in its final stages. Some of the words were found in the works of writers who lent them for use in the play; most of the text was written by the Company. The words of the refugees were quoted from people who had to leave their countries. Some of the elements of this piece were begun in RE-ARRANGEMENTS (1979) and in TOURISTS AND REFUGEES (1980), previous works of The Winter Project.

He was leaving nothing to chance or ambiguity now. But the list of characters the actors played harked back

to days of FABLE:

ACTORS

The Woman with Grey Hair: Bonnie Gilbert

Black Hair: Robbie McCauley

Brown Hair: Tina Shepard

The Man with Greyish Hair: Ray Barry

Blond Hair: Will Patton

Black Hair: Paul Zimet

The Musicians were Harry Mann, William Uttley, and Susan Little

The project for the sixth season was TRESPASSING, a portrait of a woman facing death, played hauntingly by Gloria Foster. Then in 1983 came what would be the last Winter Project for some time, performed, like its predecessor, at La MaMa. It was a chamber work for three players called LIES AND SECRETS, using material from TOURISTS AND REFUGEES with some new input, and after its March run, was taken to London. On returning, with little forewarning, Chaikin decided to disband the Winter Project indefinitely. He worked briefly with Shepard again at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on an idea for something called THE WAR IN HEAVEN, about a fallen dark angel. But they got nowhere with it at the time and discontinued the workshop. Chaikin went off to Israel at the invitation of his former teacher and mentor, Nola Chilton, now director of the Haifa Municipal Theater, to resume work on a project he'd begun with the group in Tel Aviv during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In April 1984, he went to Ontario, Canada, to direct WAITING FOR GODOT at the Stratford Festival but soon returned to New York after disagreements over casting, refusing to undertake it.

Lately Chaikin had been feeling unwell but pretended to himself that it was not another severe medical crisis until he could no longer deny the telltale symptoms such as painful breathing and lack of energy. He entered the hospital in May 1984 to undergo his third open-heart surgery to repair a leaky valve. During the operation, he suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right side and brought on a devastating condition called aphasia.

The dictionary defines *aphasia* as the loss of the ability to speak or of understanding of speech resulting in a brain lesion. For Chaikin, the first months were a bewildering black void. He couldn't associate words with ideas at all, and nothing anyone said was comprehensible. He couldn't talk, write, read, or stand up. Then, isolated words began swimming around in the void, but he couldn't connect them (it was four or five months before his name came back to him). When he regained some small power of speech, aided by a therapist from the Rusk Institute who sometimes came daily during the next several years, his first fractured phrases were those of King Lear 's last self-pitying rantings, and Masha's opening line from Chekhov's THE SEAGULL, "I am in mourning for my life."

One of the first to be notified was Sam Shepard, who called him in the hospital and wrote letters, encouraging him to get interested in their project again as a form of therapy. Shepard had some experience with word loss in his own family and had written about it in *Motel Chronicles* in 1982. He drove cross-country in the heat of summer to be with Chaikin. They worked painfully slowly, but steadily, and in the process decided to incorporate Chaikin's struggle to find the language to deal with everything into a wider study of words and their meanings. The result, THE WAR IN HEAVEN, was a monologue that Joe recited, haltingly but touchingly, under Sam's direction for a taped radio broadcast in Boston that fall. His voice in the recording (taped and mixed by John Bradley at Blank Tape Studios in New York City in October 1984) came across in a strong, assertive, if somewhat breathy baritone. Even the pained effort to enunciate clearly added immediacy to the reading; only a few slurred moments were detectable, with words like *imagine*, *rigiment*, *battilion*, *mis-*

tiken, and *sex* sounded like *six*. In the background, Shepard played appropriate percussive sounds—mostly on chimes, tympany, and gongs—that he composed. The piece lasted about twenty minutes.

I was sent a copy of the tape and marveled at how much emotion and longing to return to a former state could be contained in the abbreviated phrases that began and ended with,

I died the day I was born
And became an angel that day Since then
There are no days.

Chaikin's plight became poignant poetry.

There was a time when I used to walk
And flowers spring up behind me.
Now look. No flowers.
Take me back.
There was a time when light from eyes
Was so powerful it would blind the sun.
Now look. No light. Nothing.
Take me back.
There was a time when music
Surrounded me on all sides.
Voices. Bells. And incredible ringing.
Now listen. Nothing. No sound
But the sound of my voice.
Take me back.
I am hovering above myself
Looking for a way back in.
I'm all around this body,
Waiting.
Turn me loose.
Every second I'm weakening.
Turn me loose.

In 1991, at the invitation of Wynn Handman, *THE WAR IN HEAVEN* was presented at the American Place Theater on a bill with another new play that Jean-Claude van Itallie had begun developing with Joe in Los Angeles in 1987, during the run of yet another collaboration, *THE TRAVELER*, performed by Chaikin, at the Mark Taper Forum. It was worked on again in the course of the next year, in Los Angeles, New York, and van Itallie's hometown, Charlemont, Massachusetts. Entitled *STRUCK DUMB*, it was another study that took off from Chaikin's condition and continuing struggle (he did make remarkable recovery, but his language remained disjointed and his sentences abbreviated). Directed, like *THE WAR IN HEAVEN*, by Nancy Gabor, it put Chaikin in a more elaborate setting: a small, box-like enclosure behind a desk with a microphone, a pad and pencil, a typewriter, all surrounded by cardboard labels with the names of the items they were taped to printed in large, childlike letters for him to refer to.

If the evening was less an artistic milestone than a display of courage and plucky determination against all odds (doctors had given no hope that he would advance even this far), it nevertheless bore witness to that inherent compulsion artists have to continue telegraphing their messages—no matter how adverse the condi-

tions or difficult the medium—to those with antennas sensitive enough to pick up the signals. In his remarkable, death-defying career, Joe Chaikin had garnered all kinds of accolades and awards from four Obies (one for Lifetime Achievement) to the Vernon Rice Award; a Drama Desk Award; the Edwin Booth Award; and two Guggenheim Fellowships; a degree of Doctor of Human Letters from Kent State University (where the Open Theater archives are housed); to being honored by the National Council of Communicative Disorders for his inspiration to others with aphasia. Anyone else in his circumstances might have been content to rest on his laurels. But there he was, the eternal experimenter, struggling to communicate through the most difficult medium he'd ever encountered and turning that medium into the message:

I am practicing words
Sugar and salt—it's flower and metal.
'Astonishing,' it's a word, an explosion...
'Meaning,' it's a huge word.
To choose a word—it's a choice.
Turning this way, that...
Anything to do with speech, it's work...
My face is my words.
(He looks at the audience.)
Look at my face.
(He looks at the audience.)
Here it is.

(excerpt from STRUCK DUMB)

Before his catastrophe, Joseph Chaikin had become something of a revered guru to the avant theater crowd and downtown press. Now he looked it. His once chubby face and pug nose had thinned ascetically, and his corona of tight curls was higher on his forehead and grey; his pale blue eyes were more intense and knowing. He'd been the purest of pure experimenters. His art was for art's sake. Before his debilitating illness, I thought he was beginning to act like he was believing the billing. When he'd telephone, he made it seem like he was doing us a big favor by allowing us to be his benefactors. I bristled then, but in retrospect, realize it was a bigger favor than he—or I—imagined.

THE TALKING BAND

As the Open Theater sputtered into oblivion like a spent rocket, several sparks broke away and hurtled off in different orbits. First was the Medicine Show that had taken its inheritance and run, only to pass the next decades trying to stuff its hammy exuberance into some kind of meaningful artistic statement. But, without the restraining Chaikin hand, all it could manage was to flounce frivolously about its various performing venues, hobbled by unchecked excesses and appalling verbal histrionics that made the Jean Cocteau Rep seem polished and professional by comparison. Next was the Talking Band, led by Paul Zimet, that was a whole other kind of shooting star. It was formed in 1974 by Zimet and the Open Theater's other leading performer, Tina Shepard, along with a fellow member, actor/musician Ellen Maddow (who would become Zimet's wife). Its original purpose was to go beyond the basic gesture-and-movement emphasis of the Open Theater and focus on all the theatrical possibilities of language that had been recently neglected Off Off Broadway. But, instead of harking back immediately to plays based on dramatic dialogue, they began with poetry and epic literature, trying to develop rhythms and melodies that approached singing and integrate music as another voice instead of an accompaniment. Like Chaikin, they wished to anchor the company's aesthetic form on musical structure, so every member had to be a musician as well as performer. And, for the most of them, it was a way of staying employed, since their continued involvement with Chaikin and his Winter Project

was becoming increasingly more sporadic. (They also worked outside jobs like teaching drama at Princeton and acting in other companies.) Paul Zimet (of the expressive feet) was a transposed New Yorker who had to come home again to find himself. He certainly wasn't accomplishing it as a Harvard Medical School student in the 1960s, so he left and returned to the city to try theater. He joined in with groups like the Judson Poets Theater and after a brief time learned of Joe Chaikin and his company. When he was accepted, he immediately knew he'd found what he wanted to do and in time came to personify the very spirit of the Open Theater. As he grew older, his face became more gaunt, his hair grayer, longer, and higher on the forehead, and he took on the look of an elongated El Greco saint. Summers, he and other Band members taught drama at the Naropa Institute in Colorado, and he made a memorable appearance on National Education Television in Ed Emshwiller's film, *Surfaces*.

Tina Shepard was one of those performers who seemed to grow more youthful as time matured and broadened her acting skills. Fair-haired and petite, she possessed a beautiful, compact body that, over the years, we got to see almost every bare inch of, in one revealing role after another. Trained originally as a mime, she, too, was an Open Theater member from the start and appeared later in all of Joe Chaikin's Winter Project productions. Though small in stature, she was a "big" actor, as convincing in tough character roles as sweet ingenues. Chaikin was quick to recognize the chemistry between her and Zimet on stage and teamed them together in most of his shows. So it seemed a natural progression, then, for the two to continue the partnership in their own company.

The other original members of the Talking Band besides Zimet, Shepard, and Maddow (who had also been with Open Theater as a musician, composer, and actor), included Sybille Hayn, a statuesque blonde with a decided German accent, who had studied classical ballet in Paris and London and spent five years with the Deutsche Oper Berlin Ballet. From 1969 through 1970, she studied choreography at the Royal Academy of Ballet in London then came to the United States in 1971 to study with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham. She became a member of the Twyla Tharp Dance Company and toured the States in 1973-1974 with Meredith Monk/THE HOUSE. Hayn held a black belt in Aikido and taught it (between shows) at the New York Aikikai. She taught movement at Oberlin College, the University of Minnesota, and, with Zimet and Maddow, at Naropa Institute.

Margo Lee Sherman and Arthur Strimling were also initial members. Sherman was the lead actress for ten years with Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater before working with Joe Chaikin and continued performing in the annual Bread and Puppet Circuses in Vermont, where the group finally took up permanent residence. In the Open Theater, she had acted in THE SEAGULL and THE FABLE and created the role of the Ancestress in Meredith Monk's THE EDUCATION OF THE GIRL CHILD. Arthur Strimling, a big, strapping fellow with curly black hair, matinée-idol features, and a beautiful voice, had been with The Medicine Show Theatre Ensemble for a while before joining the Working Theater, directed by Joe Chaikin, Peter Kass, and Kristen Linklater in 1974-1975. He appeared in numerous outside productions in New York as well, including LA CANTATA by Louis Avis and the highly praised political documentary CHILE CHILE (directed by Chaikin and the winner of a 1976 Obie Award), Brecht's THE MEASURES TAKEN, and Buchner's WOYZEK. He taught voice at Berkeley, La Sorbonne, Antioch, Naropa, and in private workshops in New York.

The seventh member, Charles Stanley, was everybody's idea of a true Off Off Broadwayite. His enthusiasm and dedication to theater was boundless and infectious, and his influence on the company equaled that of Chaikin. He could do everything—act, dance, choreograph, design—and won a 1972 Obie for his contributions in general. He took over as artistic director of Caffé Cino and had his dances performed at Judson Dance Theater, La MaMa ETC, Circle Rep, Theatre Genesis, the Whitney, and Guggenheim Museums. He performed leading roles in works by Chaikin, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Robert Patrick, Marshall Mason, Paul Foster, John Vaccaro, Lanford Wilson, and Tom Eyen. His dance/theater pieces were cited in Don Mc-

Donagh's two volumes on dance, *Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance and Complete History of Modern Dance*.

The Talking Band members rehearsed in Zimet and Maddow's renovated Soho loft—a former dress factory—on Mercer Street that managed to be comfortable and spacious at the same time (this was long before the neighborhood became a “chic slum” and rents went out of sight). The first full-length piece that they created was THE KALEVALA in 1975, a basically static staging of some of the tales told in the Finnish epic. The actors were seated throughout on a double row of benches facing the audience and hardly moved except for moments of ensemble rhythmic rocking back and forth as they recited in what Zimet called a “sung-spoken” manner. My own notes, scribbled at the top of a February 1977 playbill, described it as a “provocative, interesting approach to some heavy dull stories—would like to see what they do with more profound stuff—all around good venture, though, and well worth supporting.”

In 1828, the program informed us, Ellis Lonnrot, a rural doctor, set out on the first of many journeys throughout Finland to collect traditional songs, narratives, lyric, and magic, sung by unlettered singers—male and female. His aim was to create for posterity a poetic museum of ancient Finnish-Karelian peasant life, with its farmers, fishermen, huntsmen, sea-farers, and robbers. He collated the stories, combining those related to feats of particular Finnish heroes: Vainamoinen, the old singer and sage; Ilmarinen, the great craftsman; and Lomminkainen, the adventurer. He collected magic incantations and charms (for stanching wounds and warding off bears, for example) and also poems that detailed the day-to-day life of the Karelian peasantry. Lonnrot called his anthology *The Kalevala* after the legendary Kaleva district where most of the tales took place.

The oldest stories date to at least the twelfth century and were passed on orally from singer to singer at feasts or other important social occasions. A singer would introduce a song that another would memorize and, adding embellishments, sing at other gatherings around the country before other singers, who continued the procedure. This way, the tales were woven and embroidered into the fabric of the culture, with the major characters and most important charms always included to form a kind of “told” history.

The Talking Band chose two of the sagas to interpret: the story of the desperate young woman named Aino, who, when faced with marrying the old philanderer/wizard Vainamoinen in order to ransom her brother, escaped and drowned herself; and that of Kullervo, the much-maligned, cantankerous sole survivor of his clan who was such a terrible criminal, he was forced to live on the outskirts of society. The Band made full vocal use of the works' imageries, like imitating the sounds the wind made as it impregnated an air-sprite and the rush of the sea as it became whipped into frenzy by Kullervo's greedy nets. The epic's message was timeless: it spoke to women's suffering, society's ills, and answers to living in a dreadful age. The Talking Band's performance moved smoothly from spoken to sung word, group efforts to solos, a capella parts to ones with full accompaniment. (A later version at the Theater for the New City contained the original music composed by Elizabeth Swados with some company members and ran in repertory with two newer plays, JOE BREEM... OR BREEM and WORKSONG.)

The original 1977 production of KALEVALA was at Theater Genesis, the upstairs performance space started by the Reverend Michael Allen at St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery Episcopal at 10th Street and Second Avenue (initially because, like his counterpart at St. Clement's, Sidney Lanier, he hoped his neglected church might be rejuvenated by contact with the local artistic community). The building was a handsome Greek Revival stone relic, fronted by a thick-columned porch, that seemed to have simply evolved over centuries out of its tiny square plot. Alongside was the remnant of a graveyard that had undergone massive upheavals, with stones scattered about and jutting from cracked mounds at odd angles, as if trying to ward off blows from the gnarled tree limbs that swooped menacingly toward them.

The entrance to the theater was along a brick walk on the other side of the church that skirted a small grassy yard. It opened onto a narrow flight of stairs in what must have been the parish hall, that wound up to

the large second floor chamber with high ceilings and arched windows overlooking the old cemetery. (There was a fire escape leading from one of the windows down to it, where intermission smokers could descend to ponder the consequences of their habit among the epitaphs.)

Theater Genesis was a fine setting for KALEVALA—intimate, spare, with the architecture of the arched windows forming the only backdrop necessary behind the actors and benches. Although the staging was two-dimensional (Zimet would later recall, “It was (about) cutting down the elements to two: language and music. In retrospect, it seems we barely moved in that piece. There was a lot of movement of the breath, but there wasn’t too much movement in space.” *TheaterWeek*, February 11, 1991), the richness and scope of the performers’ voices alone conjured vast ancient perspectives worthy of Wagner. James Leverett (*Soho News*, November 30, 1978) wrote that, with the Talking Band, “There is a special thrust to explore and reclaim the power of spoken language in the theater, particularly poetry. Coupled with this is an effort to establish a relationship with the audience which is informal, flexible, and warm. The Band does not attempt historical reproduction of some bardic tradition; instead, it uses the vitality of the ancient piece, full of rhythms and conventions of another language and music, as a model for new investigations. Surprisingly more about people than gods and far more willing to draw a folksy moral from its stories than, say, the *Iliad*—the poem lends itself to all of those currents, old and new. The Band sings, acts, and narrates it on a bare stage with the aid of a few musical instruments and a set of wooden stairs, like one might find in a mythical sauna.”

For me, KALEVALA was the most successful of the Talking Band’s early works. It was not only the beginning of a new approach to theater, it justified the company name—”Talking” because its roots were in language, and “Band” because it was also about making music together—and it suggested an informal mobile group like gypsies, free to pick up and travel anywhere without the cumbersome trappings of costumes and sets. Also, after KALEVALA, the group experimented less with the possibilities of pure vocal effects like speaking in unison at different tone levels, as in choral singing, and returned to Chaikin-influenced movement development (possibly because of the static results of KALEVALA) to try to strike a happy medium. But language still remained important.

On a trip up the coast of Oregon and Washington the next summer, Charles Stanley was killed in an auto accident. The impact of his sudden death numbed the company members; not only had each lost a close friend, but the group itself was bereft of its most influential mentor. His memory was invoked during the creation of the next piece, WORKSONG, when awesome aspects of his demise were incorporated into a subtext.

WORKSONG evolved from an initial inquiry into the subject of survival, in this case among rural Americans and immigrants. Marc Kaminsky was brought in as an advisor because his poetry centered on the changes these groups experienced as the country’s emphasis shifted from agriculture to industry. But, while it progressed, interest began to focus on contemporary laborers: how they dealt with money and working for someone else. The company learned, for example, that the greater distance that developed between the workers and the things they manufactured, the less the work was fulfilling. Such books as Studs Terkel’s *Working* and Barbara Garson’s *All the Livelong Day* were researched, and Kaminsky culled information that, when shaped and dramatized, summoned forth an entire cross-section of the working class, from factory to mill to sweatshop to office.

Some of the actors’ personal experiences were incorporated. Sybille Hayn, for instance, worked as a teenage model to pay for ballet class and found herself distanced from her peers because they began judging her only by her looks. Tina Shepard was then experimenting with living in the country and growing and canning her own food, and her input was that of a woman struggling to be self-sufficient in a commercialized society hostile to individuality. She was able to draw on that in her portrayal of an old Appalachian grandmother. Strimling brought to his role of a steel worker his own remembered frustrations about having to be “broke in” to that kind of job as well as that of an editor and even as an actor.

While delving into all aspects of working, the troupe repeatedly stumbled upon the names of two industry



The Talking Band: WORKSONG (1978) l-r: Paul Zimet, Ellen Maddow, Sybille Hayn, Arthur Strimling, Margo Lee Sherman. Foreground: Tina Shepard.

Photo by Nathaniel Tileston

giants—John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and Frederick Winslow Taylor—who together revolutionized the American occupational system. Rockefeller, the (in)famous capitalist, created the “corporation” and with it a new category called “office workers.” He and his heirs would become the world’s best-known philanthropists, but just the mention of his name made many people forget that and remember only such ignominious actions as his notorious strike breaking at the Ludlow coal mines in Colorado in the early 1900s that rendered miners helpless and oppressed. Taylor was industry’s first efficiency expert. Obsessed by wasted on-the-job time, his studies more than anything else presaged the robotization of the country’s work force.

The music in WORKSONG was reminiscent of old work songs, the kind sung after the day’s toils ended, and amplified feelings that were not easily verbalized. The tunes of the Dixon Brothers were borrowed and given new lyrics, and recorded authentic genre sounds gave the sense of locales depicted.

As the Talking Band became more secure with language, movement, and music, it turned its attention to developing other stage production aspects like scenic design and lighting, heretofore rudimentary and secondary in importance. Enter Jun Maeda, a transplanted Japanese, already acclaimed for his set design at La MaMa ETC. He worked with many of the groups we sponsored and won an Obie Award for sustained achievement in set design. Maeda was a wizard with wooden slats and intricate grids, fitting some of his stage environments together by interlocking grooves instead of with screws or nails. In another life, he would have been a master cabinet maker. He created a floor full of intricate trap doors for the Band’s production of PEDRO PARAMO (Theater for the New City, 1979) that became, in turn, escape hatches, secret hiding places, coffins, and trenches, that added an almost cinematic continuity to the fractured scenes based on the Juan Rulfo novel. He also designed the sets of the 1984 production of HOLDING PATTERNS, a trio of short plays, each written and performed by one of the Band members: BEDROOM SUITE by Ellen Maddow, DAILY DRILL by Paul Zimet, and HOME REMEDIES by Tina Shepard.

Other designers with whom the Band worked included Beverly Emmons, Arden Fingerhut, Marjorie Kellogg (HOT LUNCH APOSTLES, 1983), Jeremy Lebensohn (WORKSONG, SOFT TARGETS, 1981), Janice Geiser (set and puppets for THREE LIVES OF LUCIE CABRAL, based on the John Berger novella, 1987; BETTY BENDS THE BLUES, 1989; MALADY OF DEATH, 1989), and Julie Taymor (puppets and screens for GIACONDA & SI-YA-U, 1982).

Zimet directed most of the major Talking Band productions, but in the mid-1980s, Anne Bogart became a strong influence on the company. The one-time artistic director of the Trinity Repertory Company in Rhode Island (she was canned after one year over “artistic differences”) had worked closely with a number of downtown avant-garde companies including Mabou Mines and Otrabanda and founded her own organization called VIA that worked on very experimental, high-risk projects. Bogart led the company back to gesture as a language again, as they had practiced it in the Open Theater days, but with a new angle. She directed the Band’s production of NO PLAYS NO POETRY, with text from Bertolt Brecht’s theoretical writings, in collaboration with Otrabanda Company and VIA Theater at the Ohio Theater (New York City) and Williams College (Massachusetts) in 1988 and at Trinity Repertory Company (Rhode Island) in 1989.

Sidney Goldfarb wrote a number of plays for the Band (PEDRO PARAMO, 1979; AN EVENING WITH PABLO NERUDA, TRISTAN & ISOLT, 1982, among them), but my favorite and the one whose images lasted longest in my memory was HOT LUNCH APOSTLES, presented at La MaMa in 1983 and 1984. It was one of the most controversial works they ever performed, dealing, as it did, with religion and pop culture themes. Sex and the Bible have long shared double billing in literature and drama, and some of the best writing has probed the impact of one on the other, from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s American classic *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to W. Somerset Maugham’s *Miss Thompson* (later dramatized as RAIN from a 1921 collection of short stories, *The Trembling of a Leaf*). In more modern times, there have been periods when nothing else seemed to be written about or discussed on TV talk shows.

HOT LUNCH APOSTLES told of a third-rate traveling burlesque troupe that peddled prurience and piety in the form of hilariously inept striptease acts and biblical tableaux at one-night stands in one-horse towns. Their stage was a wonderfully tacky knock-down wooden platform with beaded curtain dividers created by Jun Maeda. The audience was privy to the backstage area where the performers retired after doing their numbers out beyond the curtains, back-to and silhouetted against bright spots. (In stripper parlance, “hot lunch” refers to the act of exposing the naked crotch, something only bottom-of-the-barrel hoofers would stoop to, and then only in desperation, it being the showbiz equivalent of circus geeks.)

The least common denominator of this company was stupidity and drop-dead pulchritude which was displayed with equal abandon. There was something for everyone—male, female, butch, fag, leather, girl-to-girl—you name it, they had it.

After the strips, the show’s highlight was a religious tableau featuring the crucifixion of Christ, replete with headliners in sanctimonious choir robes, schmaltzy organ passages, and a Roman centurian played by the company S & M star (Raymond Barry). After a season of pretending, the young male stripper named Red, who took the part of Christ, began believing the text and “got religion,” proselytizing all over the place. How he reconciled his newfound religiosity with his former profession, and how the rest of the troupe adjusted to it, made for some of the funniest and biting satire on stage anywhere. Before becoming a born-again scripture spouter, Jack Wetherall performed one of the show’s most provocative strips, ending up wearing only a pair of sunglasses, bright red lipstick, and an umbrella that he used as Sally Rand used a bubble, manipulating it in any number of natural and unnatural ways around his bare torso. Tina Shepard, as Phoebe, bared her soul along with the rest of her, as she bumped, ground, and unzipped, flashing a head full of fake blonde hair and a snatch to match.

The rest of the tawdry cast included Ellen Maddow as Loop, Sheila Dabney as Slide (the token black ass), Harry Mann as Cyclone (a two-bit musician), and someone calling himself Bimbo (Edge), whose playbill bio

indicated he “was a Christian of Puerto Rican birth, son of a sugar cane worker who came to America during the Korean War, a member of the Good Shepherd Faith Church where he produced some of his work.” (Whether that was meant to be as tongue-in-cheek as the rest of the evening was anybody’s guess. But one thing was certain—he knew how to cause sweaty eyeballs with his fling-it-at-’em gyrations.)

Both Paul Zimet and Ellen Maddow became increasingly interested in writing their own material and would have some success at it. But the Talking Band seemed to do best with adapted works like KALEVALA that were not written originally for the stage and concert versions of poetry like that of Chile’s Pablo Neruda or adapted novels like Rulfo’s *Pedro Paramo*, Marguerite Duras’ *Malady of Death*, and John Berger’s *Pig Earth*. Band members, on their own and with other companies, occasionally appeared in established modern classic repertory—Zimet, for example, performed Beckett’s KRAPP’S LAST TAPE with En Garde Arts in a Brooklyn waterfront warehouse to excellent notices—but as a group, preferred original work developed in rehearsal or dramatized prose. Their collective sentiments about the classics were summed up by Tina Shepard, who declared, “They’re already written, the playwright’s dead, and you can’t make any deals!”

OTRABANDA

Ellen Stewart referred to Otrabanda Company as the third-generation descendant of Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theater (the second, of course, being the Talking Band). The fact was, it was a successful blending of both with a generous topping of individual imagination and quirky humor quite its own. Less static than the Talking Band, it continued Chaikin’s movement-oriented practices and his emphasis on “presence”—the actors behaving as if the action were actually taking place at the time of the performance, with actors shown as real persons in the presence of other real people, the audience (the theory based on Buddhist thinking popularized by Russian stage director Konstantin Stanislavsky). But language was as important as it was for the Talking Band. So, since some of the actors of both groups were original Open Theater members, or had worked in Chaikin’s Winter Project, there was a good deal of crossing over of ideas and participation—Zimet appeared in many Otrabanda performances, while Roger Babb directed a number of Talking Band productions—to such an extent that company distinctions began to blur by mid-1980, and it was often difficult to determine which of them was presenting which play without a program. But of the two, Otrabanda’s origins, at least, were the most unique and exotic.

Tone Brulin, the Belgian-born playwright and director, was a former professor at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. He moved to the island of Curacao in the Netherlands Antilles, fifty miles off the coast of Venezuela in the Caribbean, in 1971, at the invitation of the local government, to set up a cultural center. Then in his early forties, he soon found the assignment isolating and frustrating and longed for some excitement. In 1971, he invited seven young actors—all former student of his at the college—to join him and continue studying his theater techniques that were strongly influenced by Jerzy Grotowski’s physicality (he had worked with Grotowski and Barba in Poland), and the style of Michel de Ghelderode, whose protégé he had been. The initial group consisted of Roger Babb, Diane Brown, Nelson Camp, David Dawkins, Cynthia Moore, Graham Paul, and Stephen Stem. Their workshop was in the poorer section of Willemstad, the capitol, and they took the name Otrabanda, that, in the native Papiementto tongue, means “the other side.” Babb, who would eventually become the company’s artistic director when it returned to the States, recalled those early days with amused nostalgia: “We were a Grotowski company for about two years. We did very interesting shows which involved moving around at high speed and sweating a lot. We also flung our long hair about and made unusual sounds. The scripts were written by Brulin, and I am sure that it was probably very interesting and entertaining.”

It was also hard work. For the first few weeks, the group had to relearn the grueling exercises that were the basis of Brulin’s technique. They combined yoga, gymnastics, and voice production in such a way that made drama school Movement 101 resemble child’s play. During that time, like Marines in boot camp, they were

not permitted to laugh (or cry), ask questions, or express doubt or embarrassment. But, according to Megan Rosenfeld of the *Washington Post*, who covered their first touring performance back in the States at the Baltimore Experimental High School, and subsequent gigs at the Studio Theater in the alley behind Crystal City in the nation's capitol (June 27, 1971), when the training session was over, "they could stand on their heads three different ways and toss each other around like acrobats."

That first play, THE KAAKA-MAKAAKOO, was billed as "the voyage of seven people to an island to find paradise, and their failure to find it." It was less a play than a continuing collage of movements and sounds punctuated by introductions of assorted hand props including a mosquito net. Rosenfeld continued, "The actors assembled in the playing area, looking like kids playing dress-up in some theater's discarded costumes. The first man to move was wearing bathing trunks and a tin tea kettle on his head, and he traveled across the floor in a jerky gait. There is no linear plot development. Sounds and movement dominate, and the line between fantasy and reality is not distinguishable. It is a tightly organized, three-ring circus exploding in all directions."

THE KAAKA MAKAAKOO derived initially from improvised scenes in which each actor created his own character based on an article in the *National Geographic* magazine about Curacao. The final work submerged these sketches into a more defined and focused piece that entranced the audiences with its energy and dynamism. Rosenfeld: "The three-ring circus can indeed be overwhelming if one applies traditional theatrical rules to explain what the Otrabanda company does. The show is very funny—after the fifteen minutes it takes to get used to the method, the zaniness of the production is surprising. The show is not meant to be dissected line by line for its Symbolic Meaning. It must be approached as an entity; an exciting tour through Kaaka-Makaakoo Land. I urge all adventurous theater freaks to see what can happen when the perimeters of the art form are expanded imaginatively."

There were those in the audience at both places, however, who found themselves wondering, after those fifteen warm-up minutes, what the hell they had gotten themselves into and took to the aisles en masse without waiting to find out. Disappointed, but undaunted, the actors tried shifting their emphasis toward more popular theater and struggled to present pieces that included meaningful social statements in ways that might attract those who hadn't experienced live theater before.

Several years earlier, inspired by the writings of Mark Twain, two of the Otrabanda troupe, David Dawkins and Diane Brown, had built themselves a wooden raft and floated down the Mississippi, stopping off at small river towns from St. Louis to New Orleans. Wherever they docked, locals showed keen interest in their rafting adventures. So did other Otrabanda members when they learned of them, and decided to develop a theater piece they could all perform, using the same means of transportation: the entire company would travel down the river by raft and set up a performing tent in each town that looked big enough to round up a few live bodies to play to.

There had been a lively history of river-traveling theatrical companies in the United States. As early as 1815 or thereabouts, Samuel Drake, his five children, and a few other players set out from Albany, New York, by wagon. When they reached Olean, New York, they bought a flat-bottom keelboat, hoisted costumes, sets, props, equipment, and themselves aboard, and floated two-hundred miles downstream to Pittsburgh to give performances in an abandoned playhouse. Drake's front man was a young actor named Noah M. Ludlow, and in 1817, he gathered his own troupe together and called it the American Theatrical Commonwealth Company. He also bought a flat-bottom boat (christened "Noah's Ark") and went down the Cumberland, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers, playing in all the biggest towns. It was not easy traveling. En route, the group all had to work at poling the raft off sand bars, and the men carried prop sabers to scare away potential river robbers. Ludlow's main goal was to reach and set up a permanent theater in New Orleans, which he did, branching out eventually to Mobile and St. Louis. He and his partner Sol Smith were the most successful of their lot, but another troupe of the period, the Chapmans, were to become known as America's first showboat

family. Originally from London, they emigrated to New York in 1827 and performed there and in Pittsburgh. But, rather than stay in the East where the family unit might eventually disperse, they decided to try their luck in the “wilderness.” They bought a sixteen-by-one-hundred foot flat-bottom boat, built a stage at one end, the pit in the middle, and a gallery at the rear for blacks. The barge also served as living quarters for the nine Chapmans, another actor, and a pilot. They called it *The Floating Theater*, and it was ready to shove off in 1831. For years afterward, the troupe floated and performed from Pittsburgh to New Orleans, then junked the boat, journeyed by steamboat back to Pittsburgh, and fitted out another barge for the next spring tour. Many of the audiences they reached had never seen live performers before and willingly paid the admission fees—fruit, yams, or fifty cents—to watch them. The acting was considered of high standard; the patriarch, William, was a trained actor who had performed at Covent Garden, and he directed the troupe in versions of CINDERELLA, Kotzebue’s THE STRANGER, and occasionally a snippet of Shakespeare’s HAMLET, gauging the presentations to the audiences on hand. In time, the Chapmans purchased a steamboat and originated the romantic phenomenon of “showboating,” that in time would include every kind of entertainment from circuses to gambling casinos, that went to and fro on the Mississippi.

The Otrabanda actors constructed their raft in the simplest way possible, so it could be easily taken apart and stored for future summers. They carefully caulked a number of empty oil drums to make them airtight for floating, then bolted together a twelve-by-seventeen-foot framework of two-by-fours, and attached the tongue-in-groove flooring to it, board by board, again using heavy-duty, all-weather nuts and bolts. That was all there was to the earliest versions, plus six oars roped to the longest sides. The company members arranged sleeping bags and clothing packs in mounds for communal comfort. Later versions had a primitive canopy of two-by-fours covered with canvas that gave minimal protection from the elements to the center of the raft, and a tiny wooden dinghy tied on behind, just in case. Coast Guard charts had to be purchased and studied minutely for sudden shifts in channels (as silt built up) and for locations of the mighty dikes, installed along the route to keep the river deep but which could be hazardous obstacles to small craft in high wind and fog.

The company purchased a huge yellow and red circus tent that was carted from place to place overland in an orange trailer pulled by a blue van. It folded up into two big canvas bags and seldom dried out thoroughly during the yearly eight-week season. The entire troupe had to help raise the tent. First the roof pieces were spread out flat on the grass and joined by rope lacings. Meanwhile, stakes were pounded into the ground around the perimeter, ten feet from the oval edge. The roof and stakes were then loosely connected by heavier cables that would tighten as the center and side poles were erected. When the roof was up, red and yellow canvas panels were hung all around the edge to form the tent’s sides. There was never any lack of volunteer help; at every stop, dozens of little boys materialized to hoist and cavort about the rigging, followed by friendly, willing adults. (The teenagers usually hung back aloofly at first, but then, unable to contain their curiosity, eventually inched nearer on their bikes to check out the scene.)

Otrabanda’s first raft trip down the Mississippi was in the summer of 1973 after an initial performance in St. Louis. The arts writer for the St. Louis *Globe Democrat*, John Brod Peters, recalled the event, “When the Otrabanda players first pitched their striped yellow and red tent under the Gateway Arch on a hot mid-summer day in 1973 and prepared to leave early the next morning on a risky-looking raft to give shows along the river, they looked and performed like a bunch of good-natured kids on a lark (which they were) involved in a one-shot venture (which they were not).” Free performances were given at twenty-five river communities, mostly black, like Waterproof, Louisiana, and Friars Point, Mississippi, where the tent was set up in a cotton field among the fluffy bolls. Farm hands and their families made up most of the audiences. One time, when there was a capacity crowd and the show as already on inside the tent, a drunk guy lunged onto the stage and started berating another in the seats. The two of them pushed each other outside and fell into a wrestling match. The entire audience rushed out to watch the fight, just as a main character in a glittering cape was making a grand entrance from the wings, shouting his lines to much fanfare and beating of drums. Seeing only the backs of heads out there, he beat a hasty retreat and hid behind the curtain. The fight ended

in about five minutes, and the crowd returned to their seats. The actor cleared his throat and began again; he was learning the hard way that in “popular” theater, everything was timing—the customer’s.

The troupe had more trouble with the play that they presented than with any of the other aspects of river-raft entertaining. Tone Brulin had left Curacao in 1972 to take up residency at the University of Ohio, and the company had followed him there, developing a work they were convinced would interest the folks they expected to encounter. It was called STUMP REMOVAL, and they worked hard on it right through the spring of 1973. The plot was simple: a mad, wicked scientist named Dr. Katakoff clones four human beings who will follow all his instructions without flinching. He teaches them fear in childhood, greed and impotence later, and deludes them into believing that old age is a time of carefree retirement. But the next generation they produce matures and rejects his simplistic blandishments; they capture him and tie him up in a shopping cart and flee dancing.

STUMP REMOVAL was preceded on the program by a vaudeville act called RIVER RAFT REVUE. It contained a master of ceremonies, a magician, a boy/girl song-and-dance team, and a pantomiming clown named Snoofy. The humor was hit-’em-over-the-head slapstick. There was juggling and even a parody of ROMEO AND JULIET. The spectators loved RIVER RAFT REVUE and got caught up in it enthusiastically. But halfway through STUMP REMOVAL, they began disappearing in clusters, then in a formidable stampede, out of the tent, until there was only a handful of the original one-hundred-fifty audience members left in the seats. After a few more such reactions, Otrabanda dropped STUMP REMOVAL and performed only the beefed up REVUE for the remainder of the tour.

The reason for mass exodus in the STUMP REMOVAL performances soon became clear. As the troupe got to know their audiences better, they realized that it wasn’t just the content that puzzled or upset them, even if the show’s style was decidedly baffling to most (actors, for example, pushing each other around in shopping carts); what really bothered the folks was the performers walking around in baggy-seated, long-john underwear, however brightly dyed. It offended them to see such “intimate” apparel so blatantly exposed on the bare stage. For their part, the actors found the crowd’s behavior puzzling. Where the small children would crowd so closely to the stage that it hampered movement, their parents took to standing around outside the tent on the hot days when the flaps were up, looking on passively. Some even drove their cars up as close as possible and stayed in them, hanging out the windows. As the company and the spectators got to know what to expect of each other, however, mutual respect and friendships developed. Sometimes the loudest, worst-behaved on-lookers at early performances were the very ones who later opened their homes to the actors, inviting them to stay overnight, shower, and be fed before paddling off to the next town.

Otrabanda continued the RIVER RAFT REVUE format every season thereafter, adding new material and costumes all the time, and expanded its playing range to include prisons. Although the company always tried to wrap the revues in some kind of meaningful overall contest, in places like that the simple act of showing up to perform *anything* was excitement enough, as it was in some of the poorest, out-of-the-way hamlets on route. So they learned to be versatile entertainers: they studied magic, stilt walking, clowning, juggling, and tap dancing, and practiced the art of ad-libbing one-liners. The folks loved jokes about local political issues and their administrators, so they scoured newspapers and tuned in radio talk shows. As the years passed, the company became very successful; the tent was expanded to include two center poles instead of one for better viewing and increased seating capacity, and the performing areas were marked off by stakes connected with stout rope to keep the tots at bay.

Steve Stern considered tent performing a group experience, with the audience an equal participant, and the first thing the company had to learn was to direct everything at it in a simple, presentational style that allowed for interaction. Roger Babb added that, unlike working in experimental theater where space is more defined and performers could concentrate on creating physical imagery within it, on the river and in the tent, there were no definitions; the space was vast and the distractions many, seeing as how the audience was

hardly set apart from the players. To be effective, they had to learn to concentrate on the space *between* the actors instead of around them, to draw focus onstage.

On one of the last tours, Otrabanda Company stopped at the town of Mayersville, Mississippi. The field near the levee where they had always performed in the past had become a tangle of weeds, so the mayor kindly had a man with an electric power mower go over it. But, before the troupe got there to set up, a farmer walked a large herd of cattle across it and left it peppered with cowflaps. The situation worsened when a thunderstorm materialized and drenched the area just as the troupe arrived. The location became a stinking quagmire, and the actors were forced to take a vote by a show of hands on whether or not to proceed. They all raised them on “no.” But, to their surprise, the townspeople, who had congregated behind them, raised theirs on “yes,” and since there were more of them, the “yesses” prevailed. The tent went up, the show went on, and the crowd sat happy as clams, up to their ankles in muck. It was one of the best performances in memory, and they didn’t have to forego an event they had anticipated eagerly all year.

During winter months, the company made its official home in New Orleans. By now it had grown to ten members, with one drop-out (Cynthia Moore) and four newcomers: Joanne Jonis, John Maynard (a fine musician who also became the managing director), Susan Horowitz (business manager), and, most significant of all, Rochelle “Rocky” Bornstein, a former ballerina, who would figure prominently later. They gave free performances in parks, schools, and nearby Bayou towns; taught workshops at a special high school for creative arts; and created programs for the New Orleans Recreation Department. Without Brulin, however, they felt leaderless, unfocused. When he accepted a job at the University of Malaysia in Penang, it was decided to join him there to work on another serious piece. But, as they soon discovered, it was no exotic vacation: from early dawn to after 8:00 PM., they were required to work on arduous physical theater exercises, learn about Asian theater, play Balinese gamelon music, and practice the Chinese Lion Dances. The result was a dance-drama that explored good and evil, titled BARONG DISPLAY (barong being traditionally a mythical dragon or spirit).

They remained nine months in Malaysia and Indonesia, working on the piece, and took it on tour when they returned to America (they had been touring now twice a year to the east and west coasts with their experimental works). A serious attempt was made to balance the heavier “important” shows that were worked on in winter with the RIVER RAFT REVUE. They performed classics like Moliere’s THE DOCTOR IN SPITE OF HIMSELF in the New Orleans parks and tried to develop weightier works that could be introduced in the tent circuit. One of these was LOUISIANA LEGONG, based on their study in Malaysia. It was conceived and directed by David Dawkins and brought together a blend of comic traditions from around the world, from Italy’s *commedia dell’arte* to Oriental street rarees, to Punch and Judy, Keystone Kops, Abbott and Costello, Barnum and Bailey, The Marx Brothers, Jerry Lewis, Ben Turpin, and Marcel Marceau, along with amalgams of Balinese music and Dixieland brass bands. The story was a loose one of the conflict between two factions—the Masks and the Clowns—and involved the use of paraphernalia (a whole orchestra of xylophone-like bell instruments that the members doubled playing with Western instruments).

The years of river travel and having to hone presentations specifically for the entertainment of non-theater oriented audiences were gloriously distilled in LOUISIANA LEGONG, but the company found it was distancing itself further and further from Brulin’s disciplined abstract aesthetic. So, it deliberately attempted to recapture some of that old influence in a piece designed to travel as a companion to LEGONG. Titled GLASS, it was created by Mark Dunau, with the ensemble, and directed by Roger Babb. It was as serious in intent as the former was frivolous, even though it contained its share of pratfalls and humorous episodes—or as humorous as possible in a piece dealing with antinuclear war.

In it, the earth was momentarily taken over by extraterrestrial beings who claimed they had felt the reverberations far out on their own planet from the bombing of Hiroshima and had come to take over all the television channels long enough to broadcast a two-fold message to earthlings: “The Earth is our mother, so

why destroy it?” and “Science is just our brain, and we all have to be responsible for it.” (Major funding for the project came from the National Science Foundation.)

In expected Otrabanda style, elaborate sound devices were employed to produce an eerie, outer-space feeling. They included electronic synthesizers, drums, and a veritable curtain of various-sized metal chimes. But the best effects were the inventive physical ones the company had become noted for—the creatures learning to cope with gravity as they roamed the earth, for example, or searching for their true identities by weaving in and out of wooden frames. The play had a subtle subtext running through it that dealt more directly with the title and its implications. Glass, it was shown, produced windows that let us look at the world, and the world, in turn, to see itself reflected in mirrors, and to look beyond itself into space through telescopic lenses. During Joe’s pilgrimage through time, he visited the fourteenth century Italian glass-blowing center of Murano, a tiny islet near Venice, for a charming look at how art could also be created out of tinted globules of the magical material, lovingly played out in period bonbon costumes and mincing movements reminiscent of old music box figurines, making the return to the harsh graphic descriptions of the Hiroshima victims all the more harrowing.

GLASS was the first Otrabanda production I saw when it played New York on tour in April 1979. I scribbled on the playbill that this was a remarkable troupe of innovators who, if they ever moved closer to the city permanently, deserved our consideration. They moved, and we considered, but that’s jumping the gun chronologically. They still had a few years left to ply the mighty Mississippi.

There were some scary close calls on the river—like hail storms with heavy gales and close encounters with barges emerging from the mist. And the broad, flat shape of the raft left it at the mercy of wind and tide, so that more than once it came perilously close to being shattered against the formidable dikes without any means to maneuver around them and had to be rescued by the Coast Guard (who, in time, became the company’s staunchest fans).

But, all in all, traveling by raft was too slow and uneventful. It was losing its romantic Twainian appeal, and, frankly, no longer caused the excitement it once did of heralding the annual arrival of fun and entertainment at the towns along the route. Most citizens knew by now when the company was about to show up anyway and didn’t much care how it got there. Trucking the players in with the tent and gear, it had to be admitted, would save time and anxiety. And the raft could only travel in one direction. The long-range hope was to replace it with a motorized boat, then maybe a houseboat or paddle-wheel tow boat, and eventually a full-fledged showboat with which they could tour not only down the Mississippi, but up as well, then along the Missouri and Ohio, past Hannibal, and east as far as Evanston, Illinois. (The good folk of Grand Tower, Illinois, even promised to be the first to build a new landing for them when the time came.) It meant life as it had been would change, of course. But they realized the only way to develop in any of the arts was to expand original concepts to their utmost potential or change course entirely. Even so, for many of the troupe, that soft pull of the tide around the ankles as they dabbled their feet over the side of the raft, the hours of waterborne summer daydreaming under the immense sweep of sky over the middle channel as it lazily wafted along, still pulled mightily on their emotions. It had been idyllic, and they wondered if anything up ahead could possibly be more fulfilling.

Roger Babb summed up that decade simply and poignantly in a letter to me years later. It also explained why the company decided to subsequently abandon the river and all the prospective plans regarding it: “We started going down the Mississippi on a raft and performing in small towns and prisons. We did it for ten years, and I think it’s about the most important theater that I have done. We performed in a tent to mostly black audiences in places like Waterproof, Louisiana, and Friars Point, Mississippi. We did a Grotowski-like piece the first year but “the people” did not enjoy it. We learned to play instruments, to juggle and eat fire, ride unicycles and how to put up a huge tent in the hot sun and row one-thousand-six-hundred miles from St. Louis to New Orleans. This was physical theater. We also refused to let anyone segregate our shows which

was not easy. It was a very crude type of theater, but it was ancient and universal, and I know what it is. It puts the more artsy-fartsy type of stuff I do now in perspective. It was far more political than anything I have ever done in New York. Just showing up in Hickman, Kentucky, is political.

“We lived in New Orleans for five years. We were very happy there. Great food and culture. But we could not compete with Mardi Gras and were not taken very seriously no matter how seriously we took ourselves. We had been touring twice a year to the east and west coasts with our more experimental works and had spent nine months in Malaysia and Indonesia with Brulin again, but some of us felt the need to be challenged and to study with some of our idols. We moved to New York and started all over.”

That was in 1980, and the first piece the company developed in its new city was SALT SPEAK, a drama about DNA. It was performed at the Ark Theater, the Theater for the New City, and in the New York City public schools under the auspices of the Arts Connection Program. (To keep the record straight, the troupe’s first exposure in New York was given to them by Ellen Stewart, who presented one of their earlier traveling productions at La MaMa ETC while they were still based in New Orleans. For her interest and trust, the company members were ever grateful, even after they incurred her wrath by inadvertently omitting to mention her seminal influence in the playbill chronology of a 1989 production they were doing at La MaMa, and she banished them from the realm—she said, “Forever!” They were devastated and depressed, but, after intervention on their behalf by a few of us who were close to both parties, they were allowed back into the fold with no apparent lingering animosity)

After SALT SPEAK, however, Otrabanda went into “deep freeze” when its members, as planned, split to pursue individual interests. Babb, for example, who had admired the work of the Open Theater all through the 1970s, was fortunate enough to be able to study with Joe Chaikin and became a member of the ongoing Winter Project, appearing regularly over the next three years in such pieces as TRESPASSING, ANTIGONE, and LIES AND SECRETS. He also began writing and staging his own compositions.

“You saw BURNING HEART when I was still working with Joe,” he reminded me. It was inspired by writings of Flannery O’Connor and Edgar Allen Poe. “I remember you didn’t like it, but it did begin our relationship, of which I am exceedingly fond.”

In 1985, Babb and Bornstein decided to revive Otrabanda. He became the artistic director, she the choreographer. They were the only permanent members this time, intending to make the company a “floating collaborative,” with guest artists invited to join ranks for varying periods or for specific projects. The two had been working together since she joined the river project in 1973, and now they made it a more permanent arrangement by getting married. The old Mississippi mud had finally worked its magic.

It was about that time that Rachelle Bornstein changed her first name professionally to “Rocky,” which had been her nickname since roller skating rink days at Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio, where she entered at age sixteen. She had begun ballet lessons at age five and joined the Miami Conservatory Ballet Company at fifteen, then performed with a modern dance group throughout high school that turned out dancers like Jeanne Ruddy of the Martha Graham Company and Lynn Allard of Molissa Fenley’s Group. Slender, supple, and vivaciously athletic, with large eyes in a narrow face and brown hair that longed to be red, she was the quintessential ballerina type (and kept her looks and figure even after years of hoofing and two children). Otrabanda was in residence at Antioch, and Babb was her movement teacher. She became so attracted (to both) that she put a proposed serious dance career on hold—as it turned out, permanently.

When I coaxed her to reminisce about that period, she ticked off some of the memorable highlights of hot, sweaty tank towns and life on the Mississippi: “Performing in Parchmart, Louisiana, a farm penal colony, in the middle of a baseball field with prisoners crawling up and onto the gates in the distance to make contact with us...disrupting the show with their catcalls, knowing that they loved us being there and that whatever stimulation we provided was enough. St. Gabriel’s women’s prison—playing basketball before the show with the prisoners, performing to a cacophonous response, tearing the show down with the same women, year

after year. Rosedale, Mississippi—hanging out after the show in a black bar with the people who came earlier to see our show, now dancing with them. Waterproof, Louisiana—not being allowed to put up our tent on the church lawn because we would have a (racially) mixed audience, and so year after year, the tent went up on the levee in a cow pasture. It was one of the greatest shows of the summer.

“I miss those times. I still thrive on the experience. I feel the influence in our work now: to be accessible and entertaining is still a priority even though we do try to be somewhat more sophisticated and are certainly more distanced from our audience. Otrabanda remains fundamentally a funky company.”

Roger Babb’s route to the fateful Antioch conjunction was slightly more circuitous. He was born in Alaska in 1949 and “lived all over the place,” since his father was a naval officer (as were his grandfather, great grandfather, and great-great grandfather). His mother died of cancer when he was six years old. The elder Babb’s last command was running Naval Communications bases in the Philippines, so Roger’s early life was spent in exotic, torrid locales, swimming in the South China Sea and climbing coconut trees. “I remember the smells of the Philippines,” he said. “Wood smoke and funky fish. The rainy season, the farmers burning their fields on the mountains at night, encircling us with this beautiful, sparkling necklace.”

Roger was sent to Antioch after his father retired to Hong Kong in 1966. Summers he joined his brothers in Alaska and worked as a firefighter. His interest in theater was sparked by his subsequent mentor Paul Triechler who had been a mathematician before going into drama and whose enthusiasm for theater was “instilled in me and others of my generation. In the lingo of the era: he blew my mind.”



OTRABANDA: re:room (1986) l-r: Roger Babb, Timothy Buckley, Rocky Bornstein

Photo by Genevieve Stephenson

So, when Tone Brulin sent out the call for his former students to join him in Curacao, Babb was ready and willing. When I first saw him at La MaMa on tour in the late 1970s, he, too, was slim and agile and had developed that slightly cocky, self-assured air that attractive performers have who know that they are always being watched. It was a cover-up, of course. “I think I was allotted a very thin patina of confidence,” he explained later. “This must be obvious to you by now, although I try to conceal my deficiency with a slightly manic bravado.”

Besides *matinée*-idol good looks and tremendous acting ability, he had another outstanding feature that couldn't be overlooked—his hair. It was long, wavy, and the most extraordinarily burnished gold color. I told him once the hair took on a role of its own whenever a spotlight shone on him, like an obligated halo. He had it cut short after that, probably due to my needling, and, until it grew back, he looked like a plucked peacock.

The first work the revitalized Otrabanda Company undertook in 1985 was *re:room*, just the kind of collaborative effort Babb and Bornstein envisioned. They performed it with Tim Buckley, a dancer/choreographer/actor who had produced work at Dance Theatre Workshop and The Kitchen, and was the recipient of a 1984 “Bessie” Award for outstanding choreography. The score was by “Blue” Gene Tierney, who worked often with the Talking Band, and the sets were by Jun Maeda, whom Babb had met at Joe Chaikin's Winter Project. A paean to love, remembrance, and the simple act of being together in one room at one time, *re:room* also sought to show how a person's mind could be a jumble of associations, even when his body is still or constrained. A movable couch and chair, the only props, were shifted about at will, defining, then redefining, the space, just as the performers' actions and moods did. The running commentary on contemporary love relationships took on added significance to those of us who knew that wedding vows were soon to be exchanged in real life between Rocky and Roger. It opened at La MaMa in April 1985.

For all their success as performers, the couple really began to hit their stride when Roger became the writer/director and Rocky, the choreographer, in their next, and some said their best, collaboration to date, BRAIN CAFE, staged at La MaMa in October 1987. With music by Blue Gene Tierney, lighting by Howard Thies, and fantastic sets by Michael Fajans and Nick Fennel, the cast included, besides Bornstein, Paul Zimet, Mary Shultz, John Fleming, and Lenard Petit.

It was an elegant yet humorous piece about disorientation, alienation, and lives being lost. It eschewed the more depressing elements like hopelessness and frustration, and instead whisked the audience through a series of droll transformations of characters who came into the café thinking they were personalities they turned out not to be, or were mistaken for other people they decided they didn't mind being mistaken for, so long as there were others there who would accept them under any conditions, real or imagined.

The main character was Bob (Paul Zimet), who entered and sat at one of the small, round tables, ordering a sandwich and coffee. The coffee arrived immediately (the sandwich took the full hour to appear, and then it was not quite clear whether it was his sandwich or someone else's, or whether, indeed, it was a sandwich at all). It was placed before him by a waitress/nurse/guardian angel, (Rocky Bornstein), who then enlisted another patron (Lenard Petit) and the cook (John Fleming) to accompany her in a jovial, disjointed dance in which each of their arms and legs seemed to thrash about to a different rhythm. She then recited (as they echoed) the limitless list of gastronomical extravaganzas offered on the menu and ended up advising him to stick to what he knew. All this time, Bob (if that's who he really was—he was beginning to wonder) looked on from his table in a state of frustration. Whenever he grasped for his coffee, the cup slipped out of reach, and the waitress would have to turn the table so it slid back to him. The table was tilted, of course, but then so were the stools around it, so you hardly noticed. The cup appeared to defy gravity, as did the sugar bowl, salt and pepper shakers, and ketchup bottles later. It was only one of many ingenious inventions the set designers devised to shatter any last vestige of stability the customer thought he still possessed.

As for the seemingly cozy café, its walls would move mysteriously out and in, sometimes making it the size of a football field, then a claustrophobic closet, as one began to wonder if it was a real place or an illusion.

Movable panels across the rear, covered in hectic floral-printed fabric didn't help either. At times, they would part to reveal hidden mirrors, that, in turn, bounced crazy-angled glimpses of actors appearing and disappearing backstage, like some chaotic kaleidoscope.

Into this crazy funhouse stepped Mary Shultz, looking for someone she said she planned to meet at 10:30. Or was it 11:00? His name, she thought, was Bob. Or Robert. Or maybe Barb? A woman maybe? She wasn't sure. But then, when asked her name, she wasn't sure of that either. She gratefully accepted the name "Betsy" that Zimet suggested, since to him, she looked like a Betsy. The closer they got to each other, the more distance there seemed between them. Even when nose to nose. Confusion, for both of them, seemed to be an ordinary condition to make the most of.

Soon the viewer realized that, not only did the walls move out and in, they were also transparent; and beyond them, a couple could be seen silently dancing. One wondered anew which was inside and which was out. Did doors and windows imprison us or liberate us? Zimet and Schultz, each relieved that there was another person in the world so totally disoriented, began to relax and share absentminded experiences as if they were perfectly normal occurrences. Before long, each was occupying the other's memories like familiar territory. As the stage lights dimmed, the audience also seemed willing to accept perplexity as an ordinary condition, at least then and there. Knowing nods followed Bob (or whoever he was) explaining that the man who was just then moving about on the other side of the wall might look like he was dancing, but, in fact, he was simply taking a long time to fall down.

Sidney Goldfarb, the author of *HOT LUNCH APOSTLES* for Talking Band, wrote the next play that Otrabanda presented, this time at P.S. 122 in May 1988, called *ORANGE GROVE*, a study in father-daughter relationships, fertility generally, and the continuity of mankind at large. Each of the six performers in the piece told convoluted and often contradictory tales about their pasts as they gathered in a worker's cottage in a southern orange grove; incest, mayhem, and murder were discussed as they helped prepare a chili supper. Lurking menacingly outside the window was a strange creature (Bornstein) on a hanging rope swing whom one of them intimated might be his long-lost daughter. The piece ended when the cutting table erupted like a volcano, and one rubber baby girl after another popped out and into the arms of the actors in a comical, yet disturbing, symbolic mass birth.

After *MIX*, a two-character work presented at Baca Downtown the same year, in which a male and female, each in scant underwear, occupied separate wooden cubicle-like movable boxes and circled each other endlessly talking about the sex they'd just shared, Otrabanda continued delving into him-and-her relationships with Babb's next work, *QUASI-KINETICS*. Using the same couple as in *BRAIN CAFE*—Mary Schultz and Paul Zimet—the emphasis was not in trying to establish coherent relationships between all-too uncertain identities but in portraying the environment their minds might create. In a real sense, the set was the star of the play (again designed by Fajans and Fennel). It consisted of three playing areas, behind each other, erected in the immense La MaMa annex in May 1989.

The foreground was a simple living room containing an overstuffed plastic chair, capable of glowing (glowering?) inwardly, beside a small, round table holding a wayward plastic tumbler that kept falling over for no apparent reason, and nearby a strangely motivated plastic trash can that broke into epileptic fits when least expected. Here the adoring couple, reconciled since *BRAIN CAFE* to their personal ambiguities, continued trying to identify with each other and their surroundings, seeking reassurance by constantly exploring each other's features with their fingers and propounding preposterous theories to try to explain their ever-changing milieu.

Beyond the sheer curtains at the back of this room was another, similarly shaped, and occupied by a hideous inflated red chair beside an upturned table, and a silly trio of dancers (Rocky Bornstein, Susan Milani, and Nancy Alfaro), who mimicked and enlarged Mary Shultz's movements into a choreographed travesty. That opened up to another space, framed like a round-cornered television screen, where the dusky figure of

John Fleming could be seen slinking about the undergrowth of a steamy tropical garden, like an enigmatic savage in an Henri Rousseau junglescape.

As time went on, the characters in the second and third room ventured down to the front parlor, and the couple got up enough courage to wander back in space, with everyone finally becoming acquainted and interplaying with each other. The highlight was a glorious picnic in the middle room, where loaves of Italian bread and bottles of seltzer were extracted from holes in the upended table top, and actors took turns jumping up and off the inflated chair like kids on a trampoline. Schultz got carried away and jumped too hard on it and was sucked down the center, disappearing and reappearing several times with arms flailing wildly, like someone caught in quicksand, before fainting. Zimet, terrified, tried to revive her (she was only dazed from excitement) and shouted to the others to remove all the furniture. He himself pushed the culprit chair down through the floor as the trio donned mops on their feet and swooshed about, noiselessly cleaning up, and Fleming hoisted the table into the air on pulleys. What had been three distinct and fantastic pages from a children's pop-up book merged finally into one vast undistinguished (conforming?) plane. At the end, the rear wall inched forward, forcing Shultz and Zimet further and further downstage until they ended up crammed into a foot of space between it and the first row of spectators, looking out apprehensively into the dark; they'd made one wish to many in their fairy tale and had returned to Square One.

Otrabanda was one company that believed in, indeed, insisted on, taking huge risks, even when they bombed, like the next Babb piece it undertook at La MaMa in 1990, called JUICE. In off-the-wall satire on current health food crazes, the regular cast did its best to create an interesting assortment of health nuts, picking its way through an elaborate set made of wooden slats designed by Jun Maeda. But my memory was long, and Shared Forms had done it first and better over a decade earlier. To Otrabanda's credit, though, when it flopped, it did so with good humor, going down laughing at itself. It never stopped being, as Rocky Bornstein put it, "fundamentally a funky company."

Over the years, Roger Babb and I corresponded at intervals, as happened with a number of my "charges" (Ellen Stewart called them her "biddies"). He was a sharp and clever wordsman, and I was always ready with free advice or a board to sound on, so our exchanges eventuated in mutual understanding and fondness. But I didn't know how deeply he appreciated my concerns until after a performance of GREEN EYES ARE FINE at P.S. 122 the next February. The play investigated the impersonality and depersonalization of telephonic communication in human relationships by having Mary Schultz and Jennifer Rohn converse on red phones while seated on separate mobile platforms, moved about by Bornstein and Babb dressed in black body suits to resemble the semi-invisible puppeteers in Japanese Bunraku theater. At once funny and scary, the phone dialogue between the two actresses touched on life, love (or lack thereof), desire, and deception, as each toyed with changing her personality to confound the one on the other end. It was a work that forced us to think about how we act on and *with* the telephone, as each was turned round and round with faces spotlighted dramatically by Pat Dignan, the lighting designer.

Performed in the cramped downstairs theater of P.S. 122, GREEN EYES ARE FINE took up only a small part of the floor space. The rest was audience seated knee to knee along one wall and halfway down another on step-back tiers. The Saturday night I attended, it was sold out, which meant cushions on the floor in front of the first rows. This heightened the sense of claustrophobia, as if the spectators themselves were crammed into airless phone booths and gave an added intensity to the action.

When the doors were thrown open before show time, the crowd acted like stampeding cattle, jostling and jockeying for the best seats. I had all I could do to commandeer a center-aisle spot and hold it down, so I didn't get a chance to look at the playbill beforehand. When it was over, I remained seated while the cattle run was reversed, like a film rolled backwards. In a little puddle of tranquility, I slowly traced the neat cover design with my finger, pondering the play, and then opened it to read the credits. I don't know if it was the sudden brightness of the overhead lights or the reflected glare on the double spread before me, but my eyes

immediately caught a bunch of letters midway down on the left-hand side. Like Egyptian hieroglyphics, they were familiar and oddly alien at the same time, and it took a moment to realize they spelled out my own name, there at the end of a list of others to whom the company was expressing special thanks: "...and Donn Russell." It was startling and unprecedented; the Foundation was often included in patron credits, but never in twenty-five years had *I* ever been singled out in print. My immediate reaction was embarrassment followed by a distancing from the name, as if it belonged to a stranger whom I was observing from a great height as he read it. In a note of acknowledgement (and concern, since a degree of anonymity was important for my function), I told Roger it reminded me of another situation involving a surprise confrontation with my name that had a similar, unnerving effect. Just after my father, Paul Belford Russell, died at age ninety-one in the small town of West Medway, Massachusetts, where he'd lived most of his life, the local undertaker, a family friend, made my mother an offer she couldn't refuse. In the town's only cemetery, most of the old families had large lots enclosed by iron fences with dominant central stones surrounded by smaller ones. Our central stone looked like a huge granite loaf of bread with the last name carved across it; individual graves were marked by low, incised slabs of polished marble. All we needed at the moment was Dad's marker, but the undertaker told her he could give her a good rake-off if she bought one for her and one for me at the same time and had only the names engraved on them with space for future dates (my brother Archie, the only other immediate family member, had made his arrangements for burial near where he lived in California). She thought it was a good idea and arranged to have them embedded at the same time. Since they weren't in place on the day of my father's interment, I forgot all about the deal and went back to New York to get on with my own affairs.

The next Christmas I was back in West Medway, and one bright, unseasonably warm afternoon when I couldn't take another minute of the endless electronic cheer emanating from the TV set Mom had on all the time, I set out for a stroll around town. Circling the nearby pond, I went, by habit, through the cemetery as a shortcut back home. The tall, graceful trees still wore autumn mantles of leaves and the grass on the plots was as green as in summer. The only movement was the ruffling of little faded flags stuck in front of veterans' stones. Overhead, a couple of birds telegraphed messages back and forth.

The warmth of the day, the quiet of the place, invited me to slow my pace, and I became absorbed with reading the legends on rows of age-blackened slabs in the section dating from the Revolution and Civil War. Lost in history and conjecture and paying no heed where I wandered, I turned a bend in the path and was struck by the sight of three identical marble markers in a row, each framed with fresh soil where grass hadn't yet been resown. As I approached the first, I automatically began reading the inscription: D-O-(ohmyGod!)-N-N(couldn't be!) P-A-U-L R-U-S-S-E-L-L, and stopped, to apply an apt cliché, dead in my tracks. Slow recognition, sudden disbelief, and immediate denial followed, accompanied by an equally clichéd popping of the eyes and lump in the throat. My name looked so irrefutably *permanent* there in stone—so disturbingly...*inert*. Then I remembered the undertaker's deal and laughed it off, but not convincingly enough to stop the chill that was creeping over me. I shuddered, gave a nod to recumbent forebears, and resumed walking with head down, hands pocketed, strangely still and sober.

Hanging my coat in the hallway closet, I heard my mother call from the kitchen, "Did you go over to see the grave?"

I said yes.

"How does it look?"

I said great. Then headed across the living room to the TV and turned up the volume on John Denver's Christmas in the Rockies Special, already in progress.

ROBERT WILSON

Continuing the extraterrestrial metaphor, the next big star to occupy the avant-garde theater firmament

was a natural wonder named Robert Wilson, a lanky giant from Texas whose vision and artistic ambition matched his height. “Big” was the only adjective that covered all aspects of him. He singlehandedly lifted the vanguard theater out of its era of Vietnam obsession and reintroduced non-political concern for abstract formalism, to say nothing of creating stage pictures within the proscenium again. Eventually, two new phrases had to be coined to describe him and his work: “Theater Artist” and “Wilsonian Spectacle.”

Like Richard Foreman, Charles Ludlam, and some of the other young bloods of the time, he was artistically a direct descendant of Jack Smith (although he would very likely resent the comparison of his coldly calculated, beautiful extravaganzas to the messy, three-ring circuses of that outrageously flamboyant exhibitionist). For me, certainly, he was the first crossover artist from visual to performance art to successfully transfer his ideas from canvas to stage, or, as he might have put it, to transcend two and three dimension (his explanation of the switch was that nothing he put on canvas could do justice to the “moving pictures” his mind envisioned.) I first noticed his name in the playbill of AMERICA HURRAH at the Pocket Theater in 1966, where he was credited with designing (and probably making) the three fantastic, outsized puppet costumes for the second one-acter MOTEL, described in the section on Joe Chaikin. When you start off that big, the only way to go is bolder. And he did.

Wilson was born in 1941 in Waco where his father was a lawyer. He almost graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in business administration but decided at the eleventh hour that architecture interested him more, and he left to study interior design at Pratt Institute (where have we heard that song before?), Brooklyn. He received his architectural degree in 1965 but was spending most of his time painting and performing. He made his public debut as a performer that summer at the U.S. pavilion at the New York World’s Fair with a group he formed called the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds (officially named the Byrd Hoffman Foundation in 1969) after an amazing elderly dance instructor in Waco, Bird Hoffman—the altered first name spelling was probably an early Wilson attempt at artiness—who had helped him overcome a childhood stammer using an effective series of movement exercises she’d invented originally to help activate brain cells of local brain-damaged children. Wilson learned her techniques and, for about nine months, assisted her.

He became so proficient that he was asked to lecture on the remarkable therapy and was made a consultant to the New York City Board of Education, instructing disturbed pupils in public schools and helping the elderly and terminally ill in Brooklyn, where he lived, Welfare Island, Harlem, and New Jersey. Although he had no formal training in therapy or dance, except what he picked up from Miss Hoffman, he found he had a natural ability to relate to troubled individuals and help them work out their problems through group exercise. One student, Robyn Anderson, who later joined his performance company, remembered as a young woman fresh out of the University of Connecticut working at Goldwater Memorial Hospital, watching a “dance” Wilson devised for iron lung patients there. He built a ceiling contraption with strings hanging from it that patients could grab with their mouths to change the lights and direct their movements.

A non-reader himself because of his childhood problem, his approach was basically nonverbal. He began conducting workshops in a loft at 147 Spring Street in Soho that would become the permanent headquarters for the Byrd Hoffman Foundation and living quarters for Wilson and dancer/choreographer Andy de Groat, as well as temporary shelter for a variable assortment of “Byrds” (as the members of the troupe were affectionately called), in an extended-family setup more along the lines of Ellen Stewart’s La MaMa than, say, the communal lifestyle of the Living Theater. His emphasis on mute movement and mime might have been what encouraged him to begin performing publicly, but his interest in theater was not sudden. Like so many other talents who gravitated to the stage professionally, he wrote and put on any number of little plays in the family garage in Waco during his early teens and later directed a children’s theater workshop at the University of Texas. But his early love was painting (much to his parents’ consternation, who wanted him to study law), and he even had a sold-out, one-man show of his art in a Dallas gallery in 1961 before returning to public performing.

The year 1966 was a crucial one. Wilson suffered a nervous breakdown and spent several months in a mental institution. When summer came, he went to work for the architect Paolo Soleri in Arizona and from that experience developed an urge to create a truly enormous outdoor sculpture somewhere. A former Pratt classmate got him a commission from the Grailville School in Loveland, Ohio, to do just that, and he made it out of five-hundred-seventy-five telephone poles sunk at varying heights in a wheat field. He called the resulting tiered square “Poles” and prophetically proclaimed it would last for many years. Although the local farm constituency was initially suspicious of the weird-looking thing, he proved to be right. It eventually became a popular spot for outings and wedding picture-taking.

For Wilson, it was the beginning of a career built on thinking in gargantuan terms that was more successfully exemplified in a scene from his first spectacle, *THE KING OF SPAIN* (1969), presented at the old Anderson Theater on Second Avenue at 4th Street for two nights, rented with all the money he had at the moment—four-hundred dollars. As actors lolled about on the drawing room set, paying no attention at all, the legs of a gigantic cat, covered in forty yards of imitation fur, slowly and silently stalked across the front of the stage and off. This startling visual effect—the legs were taller than the proscenium arch—called for an intricate overhead track-and-pully system manipulated by no less than eight backstage volunteers. Initial opposition to the prop came from Jerome Robbins, who had befriended Wilson by this time and helped finance the production. He thought the idea, for what it was worth, was too expensive—actually, preposterous—but he was so impressed with Bob’s tenacity and trust in his own vision that he gave in. After a few near-disasters at rehearsal, the legs moved perfectly, and the resulting gasps of awe from the audiences as they came into view were well worth the added expense. (They were such sensational devices theatrically that they were later incorporated into the European touring production of Wilson’s *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSEPH STALIN*. But they disintegrated one night in Paris and had to be junked, to the regret of the cast, who, by now, had conferred mascot status on them.)

Wilson’s preoccupation with things gargantuan seemed to come naturally; he himself was over six-feet-four with a Lincolnesque solemnity about his frame. His face, beneath closely cropped black hair, tended to look severe, with deepset dark eyes under tented brows, flared nostrils, and a full, set mouth that seldom eased up or down at the corners. Associates claimed he had a Svengali-like presence and was capable of drawing out of them things they didn’t know they were able to express.

Robbins, the well-known choreographer, swore that Wilson also had a knack for attracting misfits, and it was true that Wilson tended to choose odd-ball types to perform in his work in the beginning, perhaps because of his earlier therapy experience. They were all unpaid non-professionals, most of whom had attended his workshops, although some answered the occasional ads he took out in *The Village Voice*. Since his first pieces were all non-verbal, dance-related exercises, he allowed the performers to move individually however they wished, himself acting more as a traffic cop than director. Then in 1968, he presented *BYRDWOMAN* at the Spring Street loft, and it incorporated a few mumbled words along with the “chicken coop” choreography. (The “Byrdwoman” was an image he had carried since childhood of someone in a long black dress, walking on a solitary beach, and was the first of many remembered dream characters who were worked into subsequent productions.) This called for more than gestures—it meant learning lines, and, overnight, his work took on another dimension. If it required more from his actors than many of them were able to give, it nevertheless allowed him to broaden his scope, and he soon collaborated with Meredith Monk and forty other performers in *ALLEY CAT* at New York University’s Loeb Student Center.

It was about then that he and Robbins met. Robbins had just set up his American Theatre Laboratory on a NEA grant to further avant-garde theater experiments, and he asked Wilson to become company designer. When Robbins learned of his past work with disturbed children, he also invited him to teach a class in body movement and became his close ally and champion thereafter.

When Wilson joined the American Theatre Laboratory, they were working on studies based on Japanese

NO drama. The exaggerated slow-motion of the performances fascinated him, and he went on to study slow motion films as well. He once said, after viewing slowed-up film of a mother and tiny child reacting to each other as a child fell and the mother lunged to rescue it, that a lifetime of interaction—from fear to distrust to relief—became evident that would have been missed if the clip had been run at normal speed. The visible slowing of time (and movement) became the one most important element in his later work. All his “operas” (a term applied generally, whether or not they contained singing, from a French critic’s once having dubbed them “silent operas”) involved slowed motion and time, and since they could last anywhere from three hours to a week in duration, the results on audiences ranged from agonizing endurance tests to near-religious rites.

At first, dance was used only as a way of loosening up before rehearsals and performances. But slowly it worked its way into the theater pieces until it became integral and indispensable. Much of this was due to Andy deGroat, who was the closest thing to a choreographer that Wilson’s early work would have, aside from Lucinda Childs, who would design her own dances later. Totally untrained as a dancer or choreographer—Wilson found him working part-time at the Bleecker Street Cinema—deGroat moved into Wilson’s loft on Spring Street in 1967 to become a “Byrd” and found in the course of doing the exercises and routines that he had an incredible capacity to spin round and round almost endlessly without getting dizzy or disoriented. He was even able to reverse directions in mid-spin without reducing speed. (He would later become an expatriate, living mostly in Paris, and form his own European dance company.) Wilson devised some of the initial dance routines while deGroat developed specific steps, such as the “Raymond Movement” in Act I of *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSEPH STALIN*.

Raymond Andrews was an eleven-year old black boy from Alabama whom Wilson encountered while conducting therapy sessions in Summit, New Jersey, where the youngster was staying with relatives. A deaf-mute, Raymond had never attended school and was uncontrollably disruptive. Wilson invited the boy to attend his classes, and in time, he became so involved that he was eventually able to help other children with disabilities like his. Wilson adopted him, and Raymond began performing with the Byrd Hoffman School in 1969. The “Raymond Movement” was based on the motions and grunts he made when he pushed his arms up and out. He also learned to dance along with the rest of the cast by sensing floor-board vibrations. Raymond performed in Wilson’s *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SIGMUND FREUD* that year and was the inspiration and main actor in *DEAFMAN GLANCE* in 1970, a sellout at the World Theatre Festival in Nancy, France, a year later.

Learning to move slowly took much practice, muscular control, and balance. Slow-motion exercises were taught at the workshop involving sometimes the simplest activities, like walking across the room, which might take from twenty minutes to three hours. Wilson theorized that slowing down action created a tension between the speed of one’s perception and the speed of action, altering the consciousness of the performer to allow him to be aware of, and relate to, other actors making similar motions.

The effect on audiences seemed to fall into three categories, as demonstrated by the performance of *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia* (sic) *TERRACE* at the Festival of Arts in Shiraz, Iran, in 1972. This one-hundred-sixty-eight-hour marathon “opera” was partly performed in a nineteenth-century house in the city, then expanded to the side of Haft Tan Mountain, and ended on its peak at midnight. The first category was anger, leading guests to leave muttering after an hour or so of this “unfathomable” nonsense; the second was conditional interest, with viewers enduring the work for three or four hours, becoming properly entranced, and then slipping away; the third was fanatical fascination, when those left of the audience remained to the very end, even enduring the one-hundred-twenty-degree heat of midday, when most of Iran remained indoors. Wilson didn’t mind, by the way, if people dozed off during any of his presentations for he was certain they were vivid enough to penetrate subconsciouses so that, upon awakening, it would seem like dreams coming true.

My first recollections of the Spring Street loft where the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds rehearsed dated

from late 1971, when Wilson was preparing the KA MOUNTAIN piece, that was to be sponsored by the Shah Muhammad Riza Pahlavi and the Empress Farah. It was elegantly spare, with seating and standing room framing a central rectangle covered with tatami mats, and had an Oriental air of simplicity and detachment. There was already a devoted following of “in” people, like fellow downtown performers and visual artists. (Lee Breuer was to dub Wilson “King of the Avant-Garde.”) In the spring of 1972, Wilson and twelve of his Byrds went to France to conduct workshops on KA MOUNTAIN at the invitation of Jean-Louis Barrault and Michel Guy for the Festival d’ Automne. By June, the piece was ready to travel to Iran, so the troupe split up for several weeks’ holiday before the July date of arrival. Wilson, deGroat, and a few others flew off to Crete to visit Wilson’s European agent. After a quiet, restful time, they prepared to board the plane for Iran at Heraklion Airport but were stopped by a customs official, who promptly arrested Wilson when he discovered an envelope of hashish on his person and slapped him immediately in jail without bail.

Most of the company was already in Iran by then, shepherded by George Ashley, a man of many talents who started out as a puppeteer, became an accomplished photographer, then a “Byrd” by substituting one night in a role in THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSEPH STALIN, and then a staff member of Performing Artservices. He was on this tour as its administrator since Artservices was Wilson’s American representative. On learning the news, Ashley tried to contact everyone in New York who might be able to exert influence in Greece to get Wilson freed.

Meanwhile, deGroat had hired a local lawyer who advised him that a trial might be many months away, and the sentence, if a conviction, could be anything from a year up. Five weeks passed. Then deGroat, against the attorney’s advice, applied for bail on his own and, to everyone’s amazement, got it. Wilson was released with the understanding that he not leave Greece. But as soon as the little fugitive party could book onto a non-Greek flight, it fled to Istanbul, then to Shiraz.

A frazzled Ashley had other problems on his hands besides delayed openings. With temperatures rising daily to one-hundred-twenty degrees, many in the company became ill and dehydrated and had to be hospitalized. Also, the festival operators, without Wilson to deal with directly, were uneasy about distributing living allowances to Ashley, which meant the beleaguered, and now broke, Byrds were down to a hand-to-mouth pecking existence until their leader arrived. When he did, the KA MOUNTAIN production was put together hastily with the help of about seventy students from Pahlavi University who quickly learned some simplified dance steps and the ubiquitous spinning routines (which couldn’t have been unfamiliar in a land where the order of Muslim devotees called Mawlaw or Mevlevi—whirling dervishes—was founded in the thirteenth century by followers of the Persian mystic and poet Jala ad-Din Muhammad Din ar-Rumi). Acquaintances from New York who traveled to Iran for the week-long “happening” told me the mountain-top finale was a highlight of their lives, and years later they could still vividly visualize those scores of young men in djallabahs and fezzes slowly spiraling in the moonlight, as if in a dream.

Troubles continued plaguing the company: Wilson was able to return to Paris with only a portion of its members; the rest, still under Ashley’s wing, were hospitalized in Shiraz with typhoid and pneumonia. One performer had a breakdown in Paris, and Wilson had to treat her himself for fear she might be institutionalized if word got out. (His therapy worked: she recovered and eventually became president of the Byrd Hoffman Foundation.)

Wilson realized on his return to New York that henceforth he would have to work more with professional performers. His “misfits of the world,” as Jerome Robbins labeled them, were proving incompetent to handle the more involved “operas” that were being created. No longer could he tolerate such kooks as Rickie Gallo, for instance, a former Pratt classmate, who managed to insinuate himself into every performance, whether invited or not. Gallo owned a fantastic costume collection, most of it of his design and made on his mother’s sewing machine in Brooklyn: outlandish, attention-grabbing outfits like skin-tight leather suits with high boots heavy with chains; or revealing tights made of open fishnet; or body stockings in flagrant reds, yellows,

and greens, with corresponding long diaphanous trains. He would appear unexpectedly and saunter onstage in one of his “numbers,” preen and pose shamelessly for awhile, and then exit, only to return later in another costume to repeat the same. (Wilson tried to get rid of him, but couldn’t, and in the end got Gallo to limit his appearances to three per night.)

Even with all-professional casts and crews, Robert Wilson continued a pre-performance ritual he’d begun with his first play and repeated every night afterward: all those connected with the show (and there could



A LETTER FOR QUEEN VICTORIA, by Robert Wilson (1976)
Act III Café Scene I-r: Julia Busto, Christopher Knowles,
Sheryl Sutton, Andy deGrout, Cindy Lubar, Stephen Brecht

Photo by Beatrice Heyligers

be hundreds) were expected to be onstage fifteen minutes before curtain, where they formed a circle, held hands, and concentrated until they felt the energy build. Then he would walk to the center, thank them for their hard work, discuss minor changes, and wish them all a good show. This was a carryover from his group therapy days, and he claimed that by making each participant aware of dependence on all the others, the quality of the performances were better unified.

Like a charismatic football coach, Wilson was able to cast his spell well beyond the playing field and onto the bleachers where we fans huddled. He telephoned me one day during the New York run of his next “opera,” A LETTER FOR QUEEN VICTORIA, prior to taking it to the Spoleto Festival in Italy and LaRochelle in France in June 1974. In twenty minutes, he convinced me, in his deep healer’s voice, that one of the most important projects the Foundation could underwrite was the publication of the French edition of the play. He assured me it would be stunning and a meaningful contribution to twentieth-century art for which we would be proud to take credit. I realized too late that it was actually another rosette for his buttonhole, how-

ever handsomely it turned out, and kept a blue-covered copy of it, entitled UNE LETTRE POUR LA REINE VICTORIA, facing up on my desk as an embarrassing reminder of misdirected priorities; it was certainly the silliest contribution we ever made toward the development of American theater!

The year 1976 was a high point in Robert Wilson's American career when the opera he wrote in collaboration with composer Philip Glass called EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH was presented at the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center in November.

EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH grew out of Wilson's desire (need?) to work with more professionals with theater, dance, and music training. As with his earlier works, it was an almost-impossible-to-interpret spectacle involving the elements of light, movement, text, decoration, and music, separately conceived by different collaborators (Philip Glass foremost) that interwove with or played against each other throughout. Also, as in other pieces using celebrated names in the titles, this one had little to do with Albert Einstein directly, except as a symbol of creation and destruction, God and man, the sensitive (violin-playing) genius with a mind capable of developing a theory that could lead to the deadly destruction of the earth. But even that was presented as vague and secondary in the opera. The three main visual themes concerned a courtroom trial, a space-ship, and the departure of a train, all realized with Wilson's own special surreal approach, that here (and most evidently in the train sequences) was reminiscent of the enigmatic paintings of the French artist Rene Magritte. (Louis Aragon, the novelist, poet, and essayist, insisted he went one step further. He wrote in an open letter to fellow poet and leader of the surrealist movement in France, André Breton, in 1971: "Bob Wilson's spectacles aren't at all surrealistic, but they are that which we, who gave birth to surrealism, dreamed would surge after us, beyond us.")

There were nine major scenes—three each of each theme, played in train-courtroom-spaceship, train-courtroom-spaceship sequence, with five interludes between called "knee plays" that served as links connecting them and giving stage hands time to change scenery. The "knee plays" were the result of collaborating with the dancer/choreographer Lucinda Childs, who had already had a long solo career going back to Judson Poets days. It was she who suggested them, and she and Sheryl Sutton danced in each one.

The "opera" lasted five hours (non-stop), with each scene no more than a half hour in length. Outside of a Good Friday performance of Wagner's PARSIFAL at the old Met during my art student era, it was the longest I had ever sat in a theater. But the memory of it remained vivid. It was all a beautiful dream, like most of Wilson's work, but this time set to music. For me, the train sequences were the most imaginative. The stage was bare except for a cardboard-cut-out-type prop in the shape of the rear end of a caboose placed at dead center, with a door and narrow platform and railing attached. A bright-blue backdrop gave the feeling of sky above an endless plane. At regular intervals, the caboose prop was replaced by slightly smaller versions at corresponding distances away, giving the effect of a train departing.

The bed that became a bar of light in Scene Eight so hypnotized my immediate neighbors in the rear orchestra that they wouldn't budge when I tried excusing myself to answer a call of nature, and I ended up tightrope walking the row of chair backs to get to the aisle. They hadn't been that attentive earlier, however. Like others around the theater, they stood up often to stretch and yawn or retire for smokes or snacks. Like their Iranian counterparts, those who hadn't already left after the first hour spent a fair amount of time napping.

There was an odd conglomeration of patrons there, as evidenced by a stroll through the crowd that had gathered earlier outside in the plaza. It was Sunday—dark night at the Met—so few of them were opera regulars. But, since it had been plugged as a highlight of the decade (which it was), everybody else who was anybody (or pretended to be) in the several strata of cultural New York seemed to have shown up, confirmed by the lengthening links of rented limos arriving along the entrance drive like charred sausages. Hordes of downtown granny knots in shawls on the arms of sneakered long-beards in leather vests rubbed elbows with midtown agency button-downs and art-minded matrons, all offering their best profiles to the flashbulbs of

the paparazzi working the periphery. Some seemed reluctant to vacate the warm patches of sunlight still playing around the fountain, while others, more anxious to see what awaited them beyond the Chagall murals of the opera house lobby, pressed impatiently toward the revolving doors. Observing all this from a balcony, one Met official snootily asked Philip Glass who all those strangely dressed creatures were down there whom he'd never laid eyes on before. Glass replied that he'd damn well better find out because they were his future audiences.

EINSTEIN was to make Wilson and Glass more famous in that solitary performance (another was hastily added the next Sunday to satisfy popular demand) than all their previous work combined. But the costs were high, both financially and personally. The Metropolitan Opera had not donated the premises; it rented it to them. Even with the funding from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, the collaborators were left with a ninety-thousand-dollar deficit that was only partly reduced by a later auction of some of Wilson's production drawings and Glass's manuscript score, along with art works donated by artist friends. Long gone were the days when Wilson could get away with financing a production like he did BYRDWOMAN by brashly writing checks on bank accounts with no balances, hoping that by the time they bounced (and they all did), there would be money enough from ticket sales to pay it all back.

The personal cost was the vexation Glass began to feel as Wilson received most of the recognition and praise for the event. The press, before and after, touted it as "an opera by Robert Wilson" even though the playbill listed it by Robert Wilson-Philip Glass, and the composer's complex score added to its success as fully as Wilson's visual arrangements. The Lincoln Center program described it as "using an amplified ensemble of electric keyboards, winds, and soprano voice in steady stream of rhythmically active, harmonically static short notes supported by sustaining drones, to which have been added amplified choral music and occasional interludes for solo voice and electric organ." As Wilson continued receiving star treatment, their relationship, though never ruptured, cooled, and they didn't collaborate again for some time. Little did either realize that it would be Glass who would end up the more renowned with his own (real) operas presented right back there at Lincoln Center years later—at the Met and at the New York City Opera, while Wilson's celebrity would wane as he continued accepting mostly lucrative offers from abroad that kept him away for increasingly long periods. American audiences got only glimpses of his work over the next fifteen years on brief cross-country tours, and fellow artists considered him an expatriate. He also didn't endear himself with American audiences by, on his sporadic returns to the States, characterizing them as disrespectful tourists, with television-oriented mentalities; or the press, whose members he dubbed dull-witted and full of dumb-dumb questions. In contrast, he claimed even small towns in Germany had intelligent audiences, and young kids looked seriously at FAUST; and reporters there, of course, treated him and his work deferentially.

But there was no denying the sheer visual beauty he created in his works; his thinking was large, his images were large, and so was his art. Even if you hated it, you didn't forget it. But ultimately, however enchanting it was to look at, or intriguing to comprehend, it was cold and forbidding and never really touched us where we lived.

Just as Robert Wilson devised "knee plays" to connect the disparate elements of EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH, a brief profile of its composers, Philip Glass, might fulfill a similar purpose here to segue into an account of the next astronomical phenomenon mentioned at the beginning of this chapter—Mabou Mines. Glass was not only a founding member of that iconoclastic troupe, but he was married for a time to JoAnne Akalaitis, another founder and one of its more talented directors, by whom he had two children.

I labeled his EINSTEIN score "bubble music" for its insistent regurgitating motifs of three or four notes played at the same intervals up and down the scale like a versatile percolator; others called it monotonous, maverick, mesmerizing, but never boring. Critics placed him in company with Bach, Charles Ives, and Aaron Copland. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1937, of a record-store owner, in whose shop he was exposed to any kind of music that sold, from classics to pop, Glass early learned the value of it as a commodity. And that

may be why, when he decided to become a composer, he intended it as a way to make a living, not as some ivory-tower avocation.

He studied as a child at Peabody Conservatory in his hometown and entered the University of Chicago at age fifteen. By the time he'd received a masters degree at Juilliard School in New York in 1962, he had composed a number of traditionally rooted compositions. He next studied with the legendary teacher Nadia Boulanger in Paris; she insisted that he, as with her other illustrious American pupils—Elliot Carter, Mark Blitzstein, Copland, David Diamond, Walter Piston, and Virgil Thompson—pare down his work to the barest essentials, then build from there, analyzing everything precisely along the way.

He returned to Paris in 1965 to work on the filming of Conrad Rook's *Chappaqua*. His job was to transpose some of the Indian composer Ravi Shankar's sitar improvisations for conventional western instruments. It was then that he began developing his distinctive rhythmic style and minimalist approach, akin to ideas being experimented with by some of his closest associate painters and sculptors back home, and other composers like Terry Riley and Steve Reich. Later enriched by stringed instruments, electric organ, and winds, as well as human voices (at first in simple monotonous chorales), his work developed into bona fide operas like *Akhnaten*, performed at the New York City Opera in 1984; all with the same larger-than-life formats as Wilson's.

In Paris in 1965, he was living with Akalaitis, Lee Breuer, and Ruth Maleczech—the future nucleus of Mabou Mines—and it may have been under their influence that he became interested in writing music for theater. So when they returned to New York in 1968, he formed an ensemble to perform it that continued into the 1990s, appearing often in Mabou Mines productions. For years, he sported a wild mop of black hair that bounced dramatically when he conducted and became a kind of trademark, along with his heavily hooded eyes and look of perpetual sadness (although he was, in truth, pleasantly upbeat and positive). Interested in European culture, he visited India often, meditated, and eschewed meat and dairy products; but became a reputable gourmet cook.

Philip Glass officially left Mabou Mines in 1973 but continued serving on its board and composed scores for a number of future productions including all the Beckett plays we helped sponsor.

MABOU MINES

If Joe Chaikin and Robert Wilson were the generally acclaimed supernovas in the downtown astral system, then Mabou Mines was surely the brightest constellation, even if, as indicated in Chapter One, it lost a few asteroids in time, and the last performance of the original company was that of *LEAR* in 1990. The remarkable thing was that it shone so long and so brightly and produced so many performers of the first magnitude.

Everything about Mabou Mines' past was vaguely uncertain due partly to sparsely kept records and its members' casual disregard for anything except the here and now. But one thing unanimously agreed upon was that Lee Breuer was initially responsible for its founding and continued to be the most equal among equals in its ranks for a very long time. He was a product of the 1960s southern California beat scene: rebellious, iconoclastic, and obsessively fascinated with the workings of his own mind. (Even in conversation, he would come out with some really profound thought then step back to enjoy it as a spectator. Sometimes I had the feeling when in his presence that he was carrying on a dialogue not with me but with any or several of his other egos.) He attended UCLA, where he won both departmental and national playwrighting awards, and made something of a name for himself as an undergraduate director of Brecht's plays. It was there he met Ruth Maleczech, a long-haired, young actress with an ingenuous, gap-toothed smile that never lost its charm. She was a first-generation American of Yugoslavian parents, born in Cleveland, Ohio, and raised in the Arizona desert. All she ever wanted to do was act.

While still at UCLA, Breuer hitchhiked to San Francisco to attend an Actors Workshop production of

Beckett's *WAITING FOR GODOT* (Beckett and Genet were his idols). Entranced, he lingered to check out the rest of the experimental theater and music scene and was very impressed with Morton Subotnik and Pauline Oliveros' San Francisco Tape Music Center. After graduation, he and Ruth made their way back up the California coast to San Francisco where she acted with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and he was hired as an assistant to Herbert Blau at the Actors Workshop and later directed Beckett's *HAPPY DAYS* and Genet's *THE MAIDS*.

Philip Glass and JoAnne Akalaitis were already in San Francisco. Joanne was originally from Chicago, the daughter of a Western Electric factory worker. She had a devout Lithuanian Catholic upbringing—nineteen years of parochial school—that left her an atheist, but not vengeful: “I’m not one of those bitter ex-Catholics. I learned a lot from Catholicism. The mystery, the ritual, the pageantry. That’s stayed inside of me, and I appreciate it.” (*TheaterWeek*, March 18, 1991) She entered the pre-med program at the University of Chicago, intending to be first a nurse, then a doctor, but changed her mind and graduated instead with a degree in philosophy. She went on to doctoral studies at Stanford but decided that an academic career also wasn’t for her. In the process of feeling her oats, she fell into attending a workshop at San Francisco’s Tape Music Center and had close associations with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Actors Workshop, eventually meeting and befriending Glass, Breuer, and Maleczech.

Glass and Akalaitis (who married) went to live in Paris, and Breuer and Maleczech (who also married) joined them in 1965. There they met the actor David Warrilow, a gaunt, elegant shadow of a man with an unforgettably haunting voice. After involving themselves in assorted theater and film projects, they went to study at the Berliner Ensemble in Germany, then on to Poland to Grotowski’s Polish Theater Laboratory. Breuer tried to write there—he considered himself then, and later, primarily a playwright—but couldn’t, and spent the time directing works such as Beckett’s *PLAY*, that he later did with Mabou Mines. Finally, after months of frustration, he put together *B. BEAVER ANIMATION*, a monologue about a worrisome beaver who feared that the torrents of spring would demolish his dam, a theme that reflected Lee’s own current creative frustrations. (Mabou Mines staged it in 1975 in New York and revived it for a special twentieth anniversary performance in 1990.)

It was around 1968 that the five companions decided they would like to start a theater company of their own when they returned to the States. In 1970, they were all visiting near the town of Mabou Mines on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. Philip Glass bought a vacation home there and continued to retreat to it every summer. (While gathering data for this segment, we came across a two-page printed program for an organ recital that took place in a church in Mabou Mines in the mid-1970s. Small as the place was, it was reassuring to find it did, indeed, exist, and, by all indications, had some cultural inclinations; the concert, as I remembered, was a serious one and not in the least condescending.) The fledgling company worked on Breuer’s *THE RED HORSE ANIMATION* there. It was the second of a trio of *ANIMATION* pieces, the last being *THE SHAGGY DOG ANIMATION* in 1978. They took it to New York City, where they had decided to set up their theater collective. The name Mabou Mines was chosen for the obvious reason and because, as Maleczech once confided, “It was as good as any other.”

They first performed at the Paula Cooper Gallery and that seemed to set the pattern for their early venues—mostly gallery and museum settings. So far, no theaters welcomed them and that may have been partly because they were developing pieces in collaboration with visual artists like Kenneth Sonnier, Gordon Matta Clark, and Nancy Graves, that were more art installations around which they performed. Ellen Stewart was the first to invite them in at La MaMa ETC, and that opened doors to other downtown performing areas: The Theater for the New City, Performing Garage, and Wilson’s Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, where *THE RED HORSE ANIMATION* and *B. BEAVER ANIMATION* were performed in 1974-1975. Joe Papp offered them space at the Public Theater the same year, and it was there they staged their first full—some said the most memorable—production that attracted a really sizable audience. (Before then, they had been hard pressed

to fill half the folding chairs the galleries set out.) And, miracle of miracles, that audience never dwindled. It grew to the point where single tickets to the show were almost impossible to buy. Called “Mabou Mines Performs Samuel Beckett,” it consisted of three short works: *PLAY*, *COME AND GO*, and *THE LOST ONES*.

The critics most praised the last two. Lee Breuer set the three women, who sat babbling away in *COME AND GO*, out of sight of the audience, but their silly voices could be heard and their reflections seen in slanted mirrors. In *THE LOST ONES* (written as a prose piece and done there as a monologue), an entire environment was worked out where the audience was led in and seated in a cramped cylinder fifty meters round and eighteen high, with plastic foam floor and walls. Jack Kroll in *Newsweek* described it as “One of the Beckett’s most amazing purgatories. Here actor David Warrilow creates an astonishing environment single-handedly. He uses his splendidly nude body as well as a miniature model of the cylinder. This is complete with tiny homunculi and the ladders which are the only objects in their universe, and which they use in fruitless searching through the niches and tunnels that line the cylinder’s walls. This use of scale to suggest a gigantic tininess is brilliant.”

I sat in the first row on a low stool with my shoulders and arms heaved forward to make room for my neighbors. The “tiny homunculi” were claylike figures half the size of lead soldiers and nude like Warrilow, who set them clambering all over the set on minuscule ladders. The lighting was so dim, his gaunt body was mostly silhouette, and he played a flashlight from one spot to another over the Lilliputians as his seductive voice caressed our ears. I detected an unaccustomed impediment in his delivery, giving it an aged, lisping sound, and it wasn’t until he came near me later in the scene that I saw he had removed a partial denture.

At our feet, ten or twelve brightly colored children’s binoculars formed a semicircular edge to the performing area like footlights, and we were encouraged to pick them up and view the proceedings through them. As I remembered, they magnified very little, but it was a nice touch and added yet another reductive element to the set’s extraordinary scale.

Almost overnight, Lee Breuer became known as a Beckett expert, although he protested that his interests lay more with Genet, claiming to prefer the latter’s gayness and flamboyance over the former’s dour Protestant-Catholic conflicts of the mind. He only presented Beckett, he said, because it was cheap. It was true that, with his warm, sensuous personality, it would seem that Genet was closer to Breuer’s aesthetic. But he tended to change his mind at whim, often making self-contradictory pronouncements without remembering his previously voiced opinions. The fact was that Beckett was the most important influence in his career for almost a decade, and he imitated his style almost slavishly. He even, at one time, envisioned a production of *WAITING FOR GODOT* on the Bowery with local derelicts playing Beckett’s tramps, huddled around a trash fire in an authentic metal receptacle. (When Beckett was approached about it, he rejected the notion, so Breuer’s change of attitude may have resulted from the hurt he felt at being turned down.)

1976 brought *THE SAINT AND THE FOOTBALL PLAYERS*, a collaboration between Breuer, Jack Thibau, and Philip Glass, that was originally worked on in 1974 and played out of doors at Pratt Institute’s athletic gym. It was a very funny, yet devastating, pastiche on the American obsession with football, using the language of the game as abbreviated poetry—“On one,” “Hut two.” All set to Glass’s score, the actors, in white uniforms and helmets, played for real but in painful slow motion so that when they cracked heads—and they really cracked them—the reverberations seemed to go on forever, like rutting rams. The referees were all women in black-and-white striped shirts who were given delightful tasks like rolling out a dotted “line” to track the distance between passer and receiver, and, when the action stopped, herding all of the players toward “center field” for a football victory dance. A twenty-piece cacophonous band was struck up, and a large cheering section in the bleachers whipped out colored cards and joined them over their heads to form huge abstract compositions that looked like runny Clifford Still paintings.

Until now, Breuer had been regarded as the artistic director of the troupe, although it hadn’t been made official in any way. It was just that his voice and vision dominated everything and was accepted by the others.

But since this was founded as a collective of equal voices, there were stirrings in the ranks to allow others to explore directorial waters. So, in 1977, Mabou Mines mustered its formidable array of talents behind JoAnne Akalaitis when she wanted to develop a piece based on the writings of the French novelist Colette. Akalaitis, known primarily as a fine actor until then—she had an expressive, gamine face, set in a small head, and a



DEAD END KIDS, 1980. Mabou Mines/Joseph Papp. From left: John Fistos, Michael Kuhling, Bryan-St John Schofield, Ellen McElduff, Greg Mehrten, Terry O'Reilly, Chas. Cowing

distinctive upturned nose that was a cross between that of Gina Lollobrigida and Lill Palmer—had previously only directed an adaptation of a radio play by Beckett, *CASCANDO*, assisted by four newcomers to the troupe who would eventually become members: William Raymond, Ellen McElduff, Frederick Neumann, and Terry O'Reilly. It was short and played on a bill with *B. BEAVER ANIMATION* in 1975. It tracks the route of a man from his beach shack across the dunes and into the sea, and she used five actors to tell the tale in place of the one indicated in the script known only as *The Voice*.

Akalaitis felt ready now to tackle a full-length project, and she called it *DRESSED LIKE AN EGG*. The title came from a dream she once had in which she saw a long, flowing dress patterned all over with eggs, and thought the very feminine, romantic image fitted that of Colette, the French writer. So she compiled a collage drawn from the novelist's life and works, but only in an impressionistic way, with text drawn from Colette's own visual imagery.

The floor of the stage at the Public Theater was painted in wide pastel stripes that led to a backdrop made up totally of differently draped fabrics and designs; like a manufacturer's showroom, some were mere swatches no wider than the floor stripes, while others fanned down over fixed valances or were caught up in puckered loops of glittering lame, like stage curtains. Some opened vertically and some horizontally, and the lighting

designer, Robin Thomas, accentuated the movements within the divisions with corresponding broad bands of light and shadow, along which the actors moved in isolated tableaux. Everything was based on pattern and fabric variety, including the costumes (Bill Raymond and David Warrilow wore kimonos in a fashion runway-type scene that looked like they were made of elegantly pieced-together remnants from an Orchard Street dry goods merchant's cart, like Ellen Stewart used to frequent.) There were no hard edges, and the many pretty floral designs billowing against each other evoked a soft, dreamy bedroom setting.

Startling visual effects were becoming a Mabou Mines trademark, and they were rampant here: a silver curtain raised only enough to show two pairs of women's legs tap dancing toward each other on high-heeled shoes with lights embedded in the clear plastic heels; Joanne Akalaitis, seemingly leaning back against a railing in a voluptuous nineteenth century gown with wide hips and full bosom—like Colette might have worn—with one arm in a leg-o-mutton sleeve extended along its length, then stepping back and away, leaving the gown in place without a head or hands, like the kind of carnival photographer's cut-out prop I designed for Chelsea Theater Center's JUNEBUG GRADUATES 'TONIGHT!

JoAnne Akalaitis began being labeled in the press as an important emerging theater director, and tension began brewing in the troupe, yet she continued. Her next production, DEAD END KIDS, in 1980, verified her formidable potential. Subtitled, A HISTORY OF NUCLEAR POWER, it was one of the biggest projects Mabou Mines undertook. By this time, Greg Mehrten (who was to introduce a gay aesthetic to the group) had joined the ranks, but for this work, a number of outside actors had to be engaged. There was music by Philip Glass, Hector Berlioz (*The Damnation of Faust*), Ronnie & The Pomonas (*You Can Help Yourself*), The Four Sargents (*Hubba-Hubba*), and Ramsey Lewis (*Act Like You Mean It*). There was choreography, film, and special lighting. And there was a very heavy theme.

The “kids” Akalaitis referred to were those scientists who had contributed to the technology that made it possible for us to eradicate ourselves—Marie Curie, Albert Einstein. Not that they meant to do that—they intended only to expand our horizons. But it all became a Faustian “dead end.” This allowed Akalaitis to introduce a lot of related—and unrelated—material, like the Manhattan Project, the first testing of a nuclear bomb on Alamogordo; Army generals delivering radio speeches on atomic fission and fusion; scenes of World War II; and stoned-out flower children of the 1960s. It was all siphoned through a show-biz format reminiscent of the 1940s so that every aspect became humorous and horrible at the same time, which, of course, was Akalaitis's intention.

Three pages of the long yellow flyer that served as a playbill for the production were filled with quotes that backed up the visual proceedings on stage, by some of the very people who were depicted or mentioned throughout, like C. G. Jung, Pierre Curie, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Marie Curie. Medieval alchemy was discussed along with some of its better-known practitioners through the centuries: Mary the Prophetess (credited with the invention of the *bain-marie* still used in chemistry), Nicolas Flamel (who lived from 1330-1416, but who many believed still lived and was reported to have been seen at the Paris Opera in the late eighteenth century), Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor from 1576 to 1611, and Paracelsus (the sixteenth century alchemist who was descended from the Bombast family, and it was said that the word “bombastic” derived its meaning from his excitable and caustic style).

DEAD END KIDS brought out the best in the cast made up of Mines regulars and extras who had worked with the company before. Especially memorable were Ruth Maleczech as Marie Curie and George Bartenieff (of the Theater for the New City) as Faust, signing his future soul away for power in the here-and-now. A veritable chorus line of male members sang, danced, and pranced—sometimes naked—as assorted scientists, alchemists, citizens, and observers, and all sorts of magical tricks were employed from flash fire to disappearing objects.

Coincidentally, the very same year brought one of Lee Breuer's most successful efforts to the Public Theatre, A PRELUDE TO DEATH IN VENICE. It was fully as dense and textural as DEAD END KIDS, but

without the cast of thousands. In fact, the only characters present on stage were a three-foot high puppet named John and his handler Bill Raymond, who, in the course of the play, emerged as a personality in his own right, becoming part crony, part other self and part stranger, between turns as manipulator and Edgar Bergen-style voice for the dummy, in a dazzling, virtuoso performance.

The Public Theatre's old Prop Shop had been cleared out for use as the performing area, and the heavy curtains that usually blocked out the view of the landmark Colonnades building across the street had been peeled back away from the huge windows, leaving a sensational backdrop for the two figures who, with a pair of facing telephone booths at the center, were the only things on stage. The dummy John—a diminutive surrogate for mankind “on the edge”—talked intermittently with several girls (one, his mother) on one phone while simultaneously calling such organizations as “Johns Anonymous” (that, like AA, had, been trying to get him to give up “social fucking”) and “Mercury Message Service”—which had messages for him from his dead father, and from “Tom,man” (also known as Thom Mann), quoting the opening pages of *Death in Venice* in a heavy German accent. But, despite the title, and those passages, and the cryptic phone number “1875-1955,” the work had very little to do with Mann's classic novella (Venice, here, was Venice, California, man). Its major themes were “divided mind” and “disconnection” at the very center of John's “being.”

In a powerful ending, as Bill Raymond exerted more of his own persona, and after a brief epiphanal interlude when Bach's Prelude and Fugue in G was played on the touch-tone keys of the telephones, he removed his arms from the puppet's sleeves and allowed it to fall in an inanimate heap of wood and fabric on a stage shrouded in fog. Referring back to Mann's *Death in Venice*, Michael Feingold in a *Village Voice* review (June 26, 1980) intimated that Breuer seemed to be saying that every man “is his own Aschenbach, his own father, his own Tadzio (Aschenbach's idealized lover), and the awareness of his completeness, with the impossible range of possibilities it offers, is both an apotheosis and a fatal trap.”

The beauty of A PRELUDE TO DEATH IN VENICE was that it was one of the few times when Breuer didn't overwhelm the proceedings with his own excesses, a tendency that ham-shackled so much of his work. In all his soul searching and self-analysis, he seemed totally incapable of editing his own ideas. He had, as Feingold noted in another later context, “The soul of a poet without the patience of a writer.” (*Village Voice*, November 10, 1992)

Clearly, with two undeclared but dominant artistic directors running neck and neck down the track, something had to be done to curb growing resentment and division of loyalties. After a period of intense reorganization that took several years, Mabou Mines became a collective in which every member was a co-artistic director, with no single leader. As a result, more of the other members began writing and producing their own work: WRONG GUYS, created by Ruth Maleczek from a novel by Jim Strahs (1981), as well as Beckett's IMAGINATION DEAD IMAGINE (1984); Beckett's COMPANY, a near autobiographical book, transformed for the stage and acted by Frederick Neumann and his wife Honora Fergusson (1983), followed by the same couple's staging and acting in Apple Vail's STARCOCK (1986); Greg Mehrten's “cubist soap opera” exploring Hollywood homophobia, IT'S A MAN'S WORLD; Bill Raymond's penetrating exploration into the life and times of Ulysses S. Grant, entitled COLD HARBOR (1983), and his direction of FLOW MY TEARS, THE POLICEMAN SAID, by Linda Hartinian after the novel by Philip K. Dick (1985), featuring Terry O'Reilly and Ellen McElduff.

Increasingly, long-time members were working outside the company, especially Akalaitis and Breuer (possibly in attempts to redefine their own separate identities again). She directed a beautifully controlled version of the German playwright Franz Xavier Kroetz's THROUGH THE LEAVES (1984), starring Maleczek and Neumann in a production co-sponsored by Mabou Mines and Interart Theatre, and the same writer's HELP WANTED, presented at the Theater for the New City in 1986. By 1988, she was directing all over the country including a notorious rendition of Beckett's ENDGAME at Robert Brustein's American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which Beckett tried unsuccessfully to have removed from the stage in a battle

that even made the tabloids. (He strongly objected to her setting the action in a subway station instead of the empty room he explicitly specified in his directions; to her choice of a black actor to play the son, because it might wrongly have raised issues of inbreeding; and her use of a score by Philip Glass which he hated and wanted none of.) Political as well as artistic controversy surrounded many of her efforts, such as the two plays she did at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis: LEON & LENA (& LENZ), where she marched the villains on stage with the name “Moneywell” printed on the backs of their costumes, as a send up of Honeywell, the enormous conglomerate that was one of the Guthrie’s major backers (and also a manufacturer of cluster bombs during the Vietnam war); and THE SCREENS, which she dedicated in the program to the South African black liberation and Palestinian liberation movements. She had originally intended to dedicate the whole production to the two movements, but the Guthrie refused to give permission, claiming the production was theirs, not hers. So, since she could place anything in her bio, she included it there. And, unless anyone questioned whether playbills got read, it caused as much clamor as if it were on the title page.

Lee Breuer’s interpretation of Frank Wedekind’s LULU caused its own kind of sensations at the American Repertory. I attended a performance at which the conservatively dressed audience became so restless and disoriented, *boos* were heard after the first scenes (in which, naturally, Breuer staged very explicit sex scenes guaranteed to embarrass everyone), and mass evacuation occurred before intermission.

Certainly the crowning achievement of Lee Breuer’s career to date was his soaring music/drama GOSPEL AT COLONUS, presented at the Brooklyn Academy of music in November 1983. It was based loosely on Robert Fitzgerald’s English version of Sophocles’ OEDIPUS AT COLONUS and incorporated passages from his OEDIPUS REX and ANTIGONE in translations by Fitzgerald and Dudley Fitts, with music composed by Bob Telson. Telson, like Philip Glass, had studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and had written scores for other Mabou Mines productions, B. BEAVER ANIMATION, A PRELUDE TO DEATH IN VENICE, and SISTER SUZIE CINEMA—a “doo-wop” opera with libretto by Breuer, remarkable for the set—a huge airplane wing thrust out across the stage at the Public Theater, and the performers, a singing group Lee discovered somewhere in New Jersey, called Fourteen Karat Soul.

The setting for GOSPEL was an empty plain near Colonus. It occupied the right half of the stage, while the left contained tiers of colorfully costumed gospel choirs from neighboring black churches, right to the ceiling. Breuer conceived the piece as a great Pentecostal gospel service with the Oedipal legend as a parable-like sermon, segments of which were delivered by different ministers, in an all-black cast headed by Morgan Freeman. Punctuating the action were rhythmic songs emulating gospel hymns and spirituals, sung by the choirs with such throbbing intensity and feeling that they seemed to lift the spectators out of their seats. The plot centered on Oedipus’s arrival at Colonus with his daughter Antigone, after years of wandering in repentance for the dreadful sins he had unwittingly committed. (When he learned he had killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta—who took her own life when she discovered the incestuous nature of their union, he put out both his eyes and relinquished the throne of Thebes, whose citizens banished him.) He had chosen Colonus because he had been told this holy shrine near Athens was to be his final resting place. At first, he was refused entry, but after Theseus, King of Athens, heard his sermon and prayer, he was touched and relented. Oedipus’s second daughter Ismene arrived bringing the prophesy that he would now be blessed and, in turn, could bless others. Hearing this, Creon, King of Thebes, tried to woo him back to his native city. He refused. In revenge, Creon seized his daughters, but Theseus freed them, and, in gratitude, Oedipus, at his last, passed on to him his knowledge of life and gave him his blessing. The final sermon delivered, during which he counseled the congregation to mourn no more for he had found redemption in death, he proceeded on to the other world. “Indeed, his end was wonderful, if mortal’s ever was.”

The last sermon was sung by The Five Blind Boys of Alabama, a group of old men who had been famous regionally in their day. When it came time to journey on to the other world, they led each other off hand-in-hand (with a sighted attendant to guide them), as the amassed choirs lifted their voices joyously in song,

swaying and fanning themselves with woven palm fronds, turning their half of the stage into a moving pointillistic montage of vividly patterned African costumes.

I don't know when a finale sent such an electric charge so rapidly through an audience. In seconds, we found ourselves on our feet, clapping hands to the beat and screaming bravos! It might have been the collective recognition of a uniquely original theatrical art form in the making. Lee Breuer had set out to rediscover his own particular voice and found it in his love for popular American culture.

JoAnne Akalaitis retired from Mabou Mines in June 1990 and later became Joe Papp's associate artistic director at the Public Theater. Breuer vowed, as indicated in Chapter One, that after the production of *LEAR*, he intended to go off on his own, also, but like many of his pronouncements, it carried no conviction. Greg Mehrten left to pursue a directing career. The company was held together mainly by Ruth Maleczech and performers Ellen McElduff, Terry O'Reilly, Bill Raymond, and Frederick Neumann. L. B. (Burt) Dallas was still around to continue creating the magical sounds that had helped make previous productions so memorable. From 1974 to 1990, the group won an unprecedented eleven Obie Awards as well as numerous other regional and national citations. Its place in the theatrical firmament was so secure that in 1990, for example, when the director of a new young company asked where I thought the best place would be to look for a permanent home, I said anywhere in Manhattan (remembering Douglas Dunn's remark that you could perform anything in New York and someone would show up to see it), to which he replied, aghast, "Oh, come on, we're not Mabou Mines yet."

In 1979, a tiny satellite, a shooting star, emerged briefly from out of the Mabou Mines constellation, did a lustrous solo turn over the East Village, then sputtered and prematurely expired. It never possessed a blinding radiance, but in the scant seven years it lasted, like Millay's double-flamed candle, it gave a lovely light. Better still, it left a thin, glinting trail that continued to sprinkle creative sparks all over the neighborhood long afterwards. It was called *Re.Cher.Chez*, a name whose double-meaning, play-on-words structure was typical of the clever, sometimes coyly cute, but ultimately inspired mind sets of its creators, Lee Breuer, Ruth Maleczech, and Bill Raymond.

The three Mines veterans had long noted the lack of any organized training ground for emerging performance artists in New York and decided to try to establish one that would follow the line of earlier European models like Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, a place where new works could be developed by the continuing inspiration of those preceding them. The emphasis was on the artistic process and, in Maleczech's words, "A tradition that does not tie or bind." This piggyback approach to creativity was alien and initially puzzling to some American performers who had personally honed their craft by denying tradition and carved out forceful, individual styles that were designed to defy assimilation. But, even though the workshop was to be under the guiding hands of the more experienced trio, with their own work as examples on which to build, it was never intended to be a place that turned out Mabou Mines clones (although some critics daunted that's exactly what happened). It was felt that the newcomers, who were, for the most part, recent college grads schooled in diverse methods, would enrich the process with their own unique experiences. Maleczech told Caroline Palmer in a *Performance Journal* interview that she saw "this meeting of aesthetics as a primordial soup out of which could come a piece."

Formally called *Re.Cher.Chez Studio for the Avant-Garde Performing Arts*, it was founded on four concepts: free rehearsal space, no fees, no admission policy, and easy mentor accessibility. In a practical vein, there was an emphasis on theater survival techniques, teaching participants (who numbered around twenty five in the peak years) about artistic self-organization, such as designing effective flyers and posters and how best to distribute them, and all-important fund raising. Rehearsal scheduling was to be determined by the members themselves, and each was given a key to the studio at 94 St. Mark's Place.

It occupied the basement of a tenement relic, the likes of which still proliferated along that last stretch of St.

Mark's Place from First Avenue to Tompkin Park—the subdued end of the notorious thoroughfare described in an earlier chapter as a gaudy chameleon running through a frozen 1960s time frame—that had windows blanked out by chenille bedspreads or chaotic Venetian blinds and faded RENT STRIKE signs dangling from every fire escape. Like the rest of the street (and all of New York, for that matter), it was a place of contrasts and contradictions. The first night that I attended a performance there in 1980, I arrived too early to go inside. So, to avoid the chance of being buttonholed at the door by a well-meaning but resolute apprentice

DIAL A JOINT
653-1260
BIKE DELIVERY SERVICE
GOOD HERB

practicing “creative survival techniques,” I stayed out on the sidewalk for a few minutes, absorbing local color. Parked at the curb was a vintage wing-tipped Studebaker plastered all over with religious slogans and a wide, reflecting bumper sticker that warned I BRAKE FOR LOST LAMBS. Inside, in a maelstrom of what looked like all his earthly belongings, sat the bearded shepherd, out like a light behind the wheel, with one hand still propping up a pint bottle on the dash, down to a half-inch of sneaky pete that scrambled rays from the overhead street lamp into green/brown squiggles. Across the street, an elderly black widow from another time and place broomed a litter patch in front of a brick wall freshly emblazoned with a hand-lettered announcement—

The Polish sausage makers and Italian delis around on First Avenue gave way here to four-table outdoor cafés, sandwiched in by overflow speciality shops that harked back to the main drag between Second and Third, with equally tricky names like House of Uncommons and The Usual Suspects (vintage clothing).

Back at the theater, the entrance to the basement at No. 94 was marked by a solitary strand of flickering Christmas tree lights, beckoning from the iron fence, past metal trash cans, and down six steps to a landing. There, a door to the left marked SHOW IN PROGRESS opened to yet another steep flight that led down to the subterranean performing cubicle. It was a dismal place, really, best experienced after the house lights dimmed. Cramped, unhealthily hot (or cold), it was so small that even painting the walls and ceiling black hadn't produced an enlarging miracle. Around from the stairs, a platform had been erected that held ten to twelve random chairs in three tight rows. This was for the audience. Across the square concrete floor was the only other opening in the room—a narrow doorway in the opposite wall that led up three steps to a tiny toilet/dressing room. It wasn't unusual during a performance for a spectator to bolt across the stage to reach it, then return to the mortifying accompaniment of thunderously hissing water. Likewise, actors, using it for entrances and exits, sometimes had to squeeze their butts up against the inside of the door and straddle the plumbing for agonizing minutes until a scene was over, or, at the end, until enough applause was generated to warrant returning for curtain calls.

Maleczek was the most visible advisor; she seemed always available. In time, Re.Cher.Chez became her major concern as Breuer increasingly busied himself with out-of-town projects, and Raymond took on other acting assignments. She, it was, who introduced the series of Monday night works-in-progress, the best of which developed into finished productions that were presented at the annual Mayfests. Admission was open and free to the public, but, as word got around, like all Mabou Mines' projects, reservations were hard to come by. Palmer quoted Maleczek as calling the “open exchange of performer and audience ‘an attempt to cross the boundaries of jealousy and competitiveness’”. (Many of the spectators were fellow performance artists.)

Dan Hurlin, who became the most celebrated of the studio's alumni, winning an Obie in 1990 and a Boston Phoenix Award in 1986 for his extraordinary one-man tour-de-force, THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME (in which he played all the characters with costumes plucked from a clothesline), joined in 1980.

Another recent college graduate, he knew he “was really interested in experimental and alternative work, but people like Robert Wilson seemed unattainable.” Re.Cher.Chez. introduced him to an artistic sector he never knew existed. Palmer continued, “The Re.Cher.Chez. experience gave Hurlin a chance to be inside other people’s processes. ‘I came away from it with all kinds of rules I learned or made,’ he says, ‘(such as) repetition and how to make the audience see what’s going on, (and) the care with which you present something—or the abandon.’ It was during his years with Re.Cher.Chez. that Hurlin reached his turning point as a performer. SMALL, a duet orchestrated with ten recorders, was his first-ever, non-narrative and non-linear piece.”

That first encounter of mine was an evening of seven short pieces under the heading PIECEMEAL #1 (there were to be others spaced over the years), and it was interesting to note how supportive the regulars of Mabou Mines were of the undertaking. Ellen McElduff, David Wardlow, Terry O’Reilly, and Bill Raymond all performed in the first episode entitled THE COMFORT CAGE, a part of THE KEEPER series by Dale Worsley, and Raymond directed it. L. B. Dallas served as technical engineer. The obligatory half-hour delay in starting was stretched to three-quarters and almost to the limits of our patience (the participants not only created their own performance schedules, they pretty much determined when they would show up as well; in the world of delay that Off Off Broadway exemplified, this company took the cake for exasperating tardiness). When the coffee can spots were turned up and the film projector activated, the airless cube became stifling and smelly, due in part to the weather. It had been spitting rain on and off right up until show time, and, as things warmed up, a peculiar odor of wet wool arose from the coats draped over the chair backs, making me wonder if the religious nut out in the Studebaker had tracked down his flock after all and was lying in wait for us. As might be expected, there were also numerous technical delays. Under-rehearsed actors blew lines and had to start over; props were misplaced in the dark or found to have never been delivered. It was enough to make some audience members begin to lose their cool and fidget and moan, as woefully insufficient leg room threatened paralysis. All in all, not an auspicious first night.

But time and experience changed that. Eventually, Monday nights became joys to attend, as you could see progress made in the way, true to the original concepts, participants learned from each other and their mentors. Some exceptional performers seemed to blossom before our eyes. One was Beatrice Roth, who joined in 1981. No dewy-eyed college kid, she was already middle-aged and had been a busy professional actress for twenty-five years in traditional theater and had trained in the Stanislowski method. She joined the Actors Studio in 1952 and worked in stock, early Off Broadway, Broadway, regional, and television. But she gave it all up in the late 1960s. When she showed up at Re.Cher.Chez., it was as a beginner again. She wanted to be reeducated in a different acting mode and eventually developed autobiographical vignettes for herself to perform that were as stunning as they were touching. Thin, blonde, and fragile looking, she reminded us somewhat of Laurette Taylor in THE GLASS MENAGERIE, as if she had spent a lifetime in an attic full of faded souvenirs. Her performances in STUDYING CAROL LOMBARD, AUDIO PORTRAITS, and SEVENTEEN (all of which she wrote) were rough gems that led to spectacular artistry under the tutelage of Maleczech and Breuer. She went back to mainstream acting later, a wiser and more sensitive artist.

There were chilly nights as well as the tropical ones in the old basement at 94 St. Mark’s Place. The boiler could be depended upon to give out when the temperatures dipped into the thirties—usually in mid-February—and the pungent woolly outerwear remained wrapped to our bodies like layers of blubber. Through it all, the studio persevered and continued to attract major talent like Jessie Allen who joined ranks in 1983. Palmer later recorded Allen as saying that one of the most important things about Re.Cher.Chez. was having a performer of Maleczech’s caliber paying close attention and that the workshop offered “a formal structure for people (already) working independently with formal structure” and provided an open forum “in the midst of a scene that can be rife with elitism and cliquishness.”

But eventually, the cold nights outnumbered the warm ones. Growing lack of funding and the fact that so many of the artists involved were anxious to venture beyond the workshop’s hothouse atmosphere forced the

closing of Re.Chér.Chez. in 1986. It had started out with financial support only from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and our Foundation. In the end, it had attracted only three more supporters: Consolidated Edison, Manufacturers Hanover Trust, and the Jerome Foundation. Ruth Maleczech summed it up for Palmer, “The eighties were not conducive to lab experience. (The times were) very product oriented.”

As for the glowing trail it left, performers like Hurlin and Allen continued developing further and firing the imaginations of a new crop of hopefuls, who, in turn, did likewise for their starry-eyed followers. Continuum prevailed, much to the efforts of the little movement with the funny name—Re.Chér.Chez.—that could have been translated in a number of ways. I like to think of it as the “Cherished Haven for (Re)Discovery.”

Chapter Ten

Real Surreal

1970-1990

The talented artists I was honored to associate with over the years—and again in these pages—were each one of a kind, as their biographies show. All were special to me. My foremost concerns, of course, were the quality and originality of the performances they created (“...the play’s the thing”) but if circumstances had allowed, and the distance required for impartiality hadn’t been necessary, I’d have liked some of them as close friends: Ellen Stewart, for example, and Lanford Wilson; Ruth Maleczech and Roger Babb; and so on. True, they signed off each letter “with love,” and, on meeting, we performed the ritual air-kiss. But we recognized that as “theatrical” closeness, an almost instinctive bonding together for survival that had little to do with true intimacy. (In the business, your best friends were those you worked with at the moment.) What I *was* able to give them was a sympathetic ear, a critical eye, and a sounding board off which they could bounce untried, often preposterous ideas. In me they also got a loyal groupie who attempted to see every new production they mounted in New York (but never on opening nights!) for as long as we continued to fund them, and often well beyond.

Because I was involved with so many of them in twenty-five years, it was probably only natural that a few would get singled out in my mind as being slightly more special. There were three, to be exact, all young men who came of age artistically in the late 1970s and early 1980s, for whom I felt more than admiration and respect. Call it kinship. I found myself identifying with them and their work from the start, perhaps because I sensed something of myself—or what I *wished* of myself—in each.

In a scene from *AMADEUS*, Peter Shaffer’s hit Broadway play of the 1980-1981 season, the character Antonio Salieri (based on the composer of that name who became chief musician at Emperor Joseph’s Austrian court, and who taught Beethoven, Schubert, and Liszt) gives vent to his raging, all-consuming jealousy of rival Wolfgang Mozart by berating God—with whom he thought he’d struck a deal as a youth to serve obediently in exchange for boundless talent and fame—for allotting him only the ability to *recognize* genius, not to *be* one. My sympathies were with Salieri, for, though my envy had none of his rage and rancor, I, too, would like to have been blessed with the theatrical vision and originality of any—or all—of the three, instead of merely being able to appreciate their uniqueness.

They shared striking similarities. Born only a few years apart, they were all attractive, slim, dark-haired, and intense. Two of them knew and had worked with each other. They were inspired by the most surreal aspects of life. They were loners in a business that thrived on togetherness. Each, at one time or another, was nominated by press and peers as successor to Robert Wilson and his “Theater of the Marvelous” (Gloria Orenstein’s phrase). Wilson, in fact, had taken an early interest in one of them and had some knowledge of the work of another. (None would admit to being a New-Age Wilson, however, or even acknowledge Wilso-nesque tendencies. The closest they came to expressing out-and-out awe was over his amazing fundraising ability—and possibly his fame. “I wish my myth was as big as his,” one said.) They all possessed wit to spare, which was often manifested in subtle, oblique glints throughout their work, like gold threads in dim light.

But, for all their similarities, their approaches were very different and defined them individually. Within a black velvet void, the hand puppeteer Robert Anton created his miniature world of fantasy in eloquent silence; playwright John Jesurun, conversely, took the spoken word and made it the essence and action of his dramas—broadcasting it, amplifying it, and reproducing it aurally and visually in as many ways as modern electronic technology allowed; John Kelly, the performance artist, eschewed silence and the spoken word to express himself through the medium of music, dance, and mime, recycling Romantic emotionalism for a

rock-'n-roll age.

Recalling the first night she attended Robert Anton's little bedroom/theater, playwright Susan Yankowitz said she walked slowly along the street after the show, gazing up at the lighted windows on the block, and thought about all the others like him who, at that very moment, must also be making small miracles happen in similar cubbyholes around the city, and she felt warmly reassured. John Jesurun and John Kelly could well have been among them, for they, too, worked originally out of their living quarters and kept them as offices and mailing addresses later.

The three were all superb illusionists—each in his own medium—and were recognized as such by the harshest critics: their peers. Most of their performances were packed with downtown theater folk. But what I envied and appreciated most was their perceptivity. To paraphrase John Kelly (the one who wanted a “myth” as big as Robert Wilson's), I wish my vision was as big as theirs. They made mincemeat out of reality by mixing everyday imagery with fantasy into a weird and wonderful blend. Surrealism was no longer just moonscapes and limp watches.

GANYMEDE IN TRANSIT

In Greek mythology, Ganymede was the most beautiful of all mortals—a young Trojan prince whom the god Zeus, disguised as an eagle, snatched from the midst of his companions and carried to Mt. Olympus; he was granted immortality and replaced Hebe, goddess of youth, as the cup-bearer to the gods. Zeus compensated the youth's father Tros for his loss by a pair of divine horses. Astronomers later placed Ganymede among the stars under the name Aquarius the Water Bearer.

No two of his acquaintances would ever be able to agree on who the real Robbie Anton was. To each he presented certain aspects of himself and withheld others, and the combinations changed, so his relationships were highly personal and, in a sense, made to order. At the end, even his closest associates discovered—some to their surprise—that there were sides to him they never knew or suspected. Collectively, their impressions of him formed a study in contrasts and contradictions: a spoiled rich Jewish/American prince and an Indian mystic; a tap-dancing sybarite and a grave conjurer; a weird eccentric and a boyish charmer; a sequestered recluse and a celebrity hobnobber. To some he was passionate, to others aloof; he could project a spiritual, god-like purity in his miniature puppet domain one night, and the next willingly submit himself to the most degrading physical humiliations in the subterranean S&M bars of the West Village.

I remembered his avowed kinship with Ganymede, the mythological darling of Zeus, and the archival etching he possessed showing the youth, scantily draped, being transported aloft under the protective wing of a great eagle. But everyone would have to agree that, no matter which Anton they were presented, he was always the most private of individuals. Robert Bethea, a friend from high school days onward and the volunteer “house manager” (unpaid) for all of Anton's early presentations (regulars linked them as Robbie-and-Bobbie) thought that was his most attractive characteristic. It was “why it was fun to be with him; you were in this private sanctum, and felt so privileged. There was all this creative energy rampant around you...” even when you were not allowed to participate in it per se. As a result, few outside his close circle knew more than that he was considered—by word of mouth if not by experiencing one of his performances—to be the most original talent in the underground theater movement of the time, with a fast-growing reputation. Little wonder then that the Downtown community was stunned to read the black-bordered obit in *The Village Voice* in late September, 1984, that began:

ROBERT ANTON

1949-1984

Robert Anton, the miraculous puppeteer, died on August 29, in Los Angeles, by his own hand. He had been physically ill for a year. He was thirty-five years old...

Little did any of them know, also, that Anton had been involved with metaphysics for some time, and strongly believed in rebirth and that he had lived previous lives; he also believed he had entered his present existence reluctantly—not wanting to be there—and found it a struggle to remain. So he manifested a fatal illness to give him cause to terminate it, which he did, (reportedly with an overdose of pills) in the sumptuous surroundings of the Beverly Hills Hotel in Hollywood, California.

The timing was prompted by the appearance of fresh internal complications in the year-old illness he had “manifested” that heretofore had affected him mainly emotionally, in no little part due to his desperate attempt to keep it a secret. Earlier diagnosis indicated he was infected by a strange killer virus so new it had only recently been granted an official name: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome—AIDS. The worst of it, besides the fact that no one ever survived it, was that so far it seemed to strike only young men in their twenties and thirties who indulged in mutual anal sexual intercourse. So the stigma was immediate and devastating—one’s most private behavior was exposed to widespread scrutiny and censure. For someone of Robbie Anton’s nature, it was unbearable.

Bette Stoler, an art dealer and gallery owner, lived with him at the time—she believed they were long-time “soul-mates” with “unconditional love for each other”—and was one of only three intimates (Darby Long, his therapist, and Jean-Claude van Itallie, the playwright, political activist, and self-proclaimed Tibetan Buddhist priest were the others) who were privy to the secret and its impact on him physically and mentally (it was she who initially took him to her doctor for examination and referral). “Shame,” she recalled, was “one of the things that killed him. He had tremendous shame, and didn’t want anyone to know.”

If the Beverly Hills Hotel seemed to some an unlikely setting for a final act, then they were ignorant of another aspect of the Anton persona; his lifelong love affair with Hollywood movies and legendary performers. It was an addiction and a passion; he so idolized Fred Astaire, for example, that he learned to tap dance. (Stoler believed that if video had been around earlier, he would have spent all his free time watching old films and would still have been alive.) The Beverly Hills Hotel, called “the Hills” by the initiated, represented the very center of that peculiar universe for Anton: the fabled enclave of tiled-roof cottages had been home-away-from-home for decades of celebrities. Every mogul or star worth remembering had at one time strolled its manicured walkways or hidden out behind its high-security gates. The pool was one of the most visible watering places in the western hemisphere. Dick Cavett, the TV talk show host, once ticked off all the reasons for having your name paged at poolside—even when you were nowhere around: to let everyone know you’re in town; to keep your name afloat when you haven’t been seen in anything recently, since you never knew what producer had been wrestling with a casting problem and you might be the solution; and, to let all and sundry know you could still afford to stay there, especially when word had been out that you are down to your last Valium (though, truth to tell, you didn’t have to *reside* at the “Hills” to loll about the pool—that could be facilitated with a generous greasing of a page’s palm as you arranged to have your name broadcast). The ultimate ploy, Cavett indicated, was to not respond to a paging you’d arranged; that sent the message that you were too busy to bother!

Another of Anton’s idols, as we shall soon learn, was the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini. When he found that Fellini stayed at the “Hills” on a promotional visit in 1970, Anton began going there for brief get-away stays himself and found they were soothing antidotes—in time *and* space—to rough-edged New York realities, and as healing as many of the holistic remedies he constantly sought to assuage a chronic hypochondria (before the onslaught of AIDS). Susan Yankowitz, the playwright and an early associate, recalled he was

always coming down with something or complaining that he thought he *might* be coming down with something. He was a constant target for colds and the flu, and it was that history and his naturally thin, wan appearance that kept friends from realizing his final condition.

The hotel was only one of the details in a meticulously worked out master plan for his eventual denouement; he had obviously given it all as much thought and attention as one of his incredibly intricate “shows” (his term), demonstrating that he was, above all, a consummate showman, as anyone aware of his work knew. There was the same intriguing mixture of the occult and theatricality: on his forehead, for example, was found a plutonium crystal that Bob Bethea had given him long ago; nearby was a relevant tarot card; there was a lengthy, carefully worded note explaining what had happened; and a will with thirteen beneficiaries, naming Bette Stoler and Darby Long as co-executors, and including Bethea, van Itallie, and a more recent, but no less important friend, the choreographer/dancer/director Tommy Tune. To Stoler went the difficult task of dividing up a substantial estate, accomplished only after working out a settlement with his family (who, by the way, were as unaware of his condition or intentions as anyone else).

Anton had done a series of “spiritual” drawings, some of which had been shown at the Stoler Gallery along with several clown figures that had once graced Tiffany windows. A few of those were given to Tune, along with what Bethea remembered as a set of very large fans. Stoler became the custodian of all the puppets and eventually stored most of them with Bethea. The largest part of his theater went to the Hip Pocket Theater in Fort Worth, Texas—along with some of the money—that was run by Johnny and Deanne Simon, who, with Bethea, were close childhood companions; it included lights, dimmer boards, stage instruments and pieces of scenery. Susan Yankowitz remembered something about “a big battle over [dispensing] some of his things before he died,” which may have resulted from the fact that “he had stored a lot of his stuff at another friend’s place at the time, and she was reluctant to hand it over to Stoler.”

Honoring Robbie’s wishes, the beneficiaries gathered at his Fifteenth Street loft several days after his death. Flowers were everywhere. They grieved and consoled one another; they fondled objects and examined the last “Proscenium” project, still unfinished. At van Itallie’s urging, Bethea told the story of the three-act show that Robbie performed in Paris, which was surprisingly difficult to do, since, like all the works, it had been presented without dialogue. But he found doing it emotionally healing, even if it was in fits and starts. It prompted the others to follow with reminiscences and personal anecdotes, and they were amazed to find they all remembered most vividly the marvelous elfin humor that suffused even the darkest of Anton’s pieces. By evening’s end a bond had developed among them that gave them solace and strength. It was as if each had come bearing a key piece of a jigsaw puzzle that, when fitted in place, gave them the nearest thing to a finished portrait they would ever have of the still-elusive intimate stranger. His presence seemed everywhere.

Robert Anton was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1949, of wealthy upper middle class Jewish parents. His Yiddish-speaking grandparents lived in the Pale in Eastern Europe. At an early age he rejected Judaism as a cruel and punitive religion, but retained traces of traditional Jewish warmth and humor. His hair was black, his eyes dark, and his skin very white. On first meeting him and learning he was from Texas, I assumed his background was Spanish-Mexican. He had something of the manner of a Spanish grandee about him. He reminded others of the young Shah of Iran.

He was drawing at the age of four, and by eight or nine was building tiny stage sets (with no figures) on card tables, using cardboard boxes, and, in one inspired instance, a hat box for a theater-in-the-round. His parents recognized his interest and, in the beginning at least, gave him encouragement. For one birthday present they commissioned a cabinet maker to construct a beautiful miniature theater, complete with a proscenium arch eighteen inches wide and twelve inches high, fly space, wings, pulleys, and all sorts of lighting effects. They took him to New York periodically to attend Broadway shows. He was enchanted by such hits as FUNNY GIRL, FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, HELLO, DOLLY!, THE KING AND I and FLOWER DRUM SONG. “He was stupefied by Broadway,” Bob Bethea recalled, “and then went home and created the sets from

memory.” He even included settings for operas like *MACBETH*. The author Benjamin Taylor, another early acquaintance, wrote that he thought Robbie’s original childhood impulse in making those sets was to create his own scaled down world over which he could be the absolute ruler. Bethea maintained he didn’t like the environment he lived in and sought refuge in make-believe. “His parents tried, but never could understand the boy’s obsession.”

They lived next to a country club and that was the center of their lives. Robbie’s older brother by two years (who was in Bethea’s high school class) was a local golf champion, a smart dresser, and very popular socially, as were both parents. From the start Robbie was different; he didn’t fit the mold. He was a born artist. “His mother recognized that,” Bethea said, “but she couldn’t do anything about it. She couldn’t reconcile that into her life style. She loved him very much, and he loved her very much. But they were always at odds. She wanted him to be—whatever rich Jewish parents want their sons to be. It made them both crazy. It was nuts.”

Anton and Bethea found like spirits in each other when they met while working in summer stock theater where Anton was the scenic designer. They both hated Fort Worth, and daydreamed about the time when they could escape its confining conventionality. Bob, being the older, entered the University of Texas after high school, then Texas Christian University, studying theater. When it was his turn, Robbie enrolled at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh to major in stage design. He stayed one year and left; the scholastic system was not for him. But he made many acquaintances there whom he would encounter again in theatrical circles, like Wendy Wasdahl who would one day co-found The Shared Forms Theatre. And he became interested in making puppets there. His first effort was *THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS*—seven little white ephemeral women, crudely rendered and clothed in whatever bits of rags were at hand. But they already possessed the strange inimitable surreal quality that would later become his trademark. He worked on them instead of attending classes, which he found boring and far behind his self-taught level in designing.

His aim then was to go to New York and perhaps set up some kind of small theater including puppets. But first he decided to fulfill a longing he’d had for some time to travel through India. He had become spiritually drawn to it after listening to the philosopher Meher Baba’s discourses in college, and even included a pilgrimage to Baba’s home in India, where he stayed a month (Baba had already died). The entire experience of the country became the most important influence on him and his work after that. Bette Stoler recalled he “thought about that trip and the images he saw there every day of his life—Indian art and religious philosophy.” After that, “he was very much in touch with his past lives.” I understood his visual obsession after visiting there with Arthur Schaefer as part of a round-the-world junket we made in 1988: the visions of women in brilliant saris forming patties from fresh camel dung and stacking them to dry along the roads, to be used later for fuel; of begging children with angelic faces smiling from hideously deformed bodies and limbs like lumps of spaghetti; of a holy man blessing a group of laborers by a bathing well, his body smeared with red dye and wearing a rooster headdress and bustle of long glistening feathers; of a beautiful Indian movie star being accompanied to her wedding in Delhi, dressed in a costly red and gold sari, with heavy gold trinkets dangling from a chain stretched from one pierced nostril to one pierced ear; of sacred white brahma cattle snarling traffic on a Jaipur thoroughfare because no one would dare to interrupt or alter their itinerary—all those images and hundreds more remained fixed indelibly in my mind ever after like none I’d seen anywhere else.

Anton returned, thin, bearded, and looking very ascetic. He arrived in New York in 1970 (as did Bob Bethea), and took up residence first in Brooklyn. Then he began looking for some kind of meaningful work. Bette Staler was the manager of Design Research at the time, a unique store on Fifty-seventh Street in Manhattan that sold everything from pens to furniture to children’s toys, all designed by modern crafters so beautifully and simply they could stand alone as sculptures. In fact, I was so taken by an undated wooden version of a hobby horse on rollers once, that I slipped into the showroom one crowded Saturday with a small sketch pad and secretly copied it to make later for a small friend. (It turned out so well that, unfortunately, it

was placed in a corner of the living room by her parents as a work of art, and the poor child never got to play with it.) Stoler recalled how she and Robbie first met:

“...I put an ad in the paper because we needed somebody for the furniture department, and it was in the *Times* and the *Voice*. The next day we had a lot people—around the block—probably a hundred...I was very young and very zealous, and I was [interviewing] one after another, without even one possibility. Then he came along, and I said ‘What do you do?’ and he said ‘I make puppets.’ And I hired him—right then! He was my soul mate. We knew immediately.” (She found it difficult to discuss his “demise” in later years, since, for her, he was still very much there.)

That same year (1970), Anton learned that Federico Fellini, who, with his wife, was touring the United States to promote his latest film *Fellini Satyricon*, would be coming to New York and staying at the Plaza Hotel briefly. Anton wrapped up several of his little clown puppets, since he knew Fellini was fascinated with clowns and circuses generally, and haunted the Plaza entrances, waiting for the great man to emerge so he could show them to him. He had seen all his films and knew all about the personage whom he considered the greatest filmmaker of the period.

Fellini was born in Rimini, Italy in 1920, and his obsession with clowns began as a young boy when a traveling circus came to town directed by the renowned clown Pierino. He was to recall, “He [Pierino] embodies in a fantastical character, all the irrational aspects of man, the instinctive part of him, the touch of rebellion against the established order which is in each one of us. He is a caricature of the most animal, most childish aspects of man, the victim of jokes and the joker. From the first meeting I wanted to be like him.”

In some interviews he claimed to have run away with Pierino’s circus at age ten (his mother denied it), but, whatever the truth, it was certain he was drawn most strongly and at an early age to the world of circus spectacle. He put on puppet shows as a lad and came to love the world of comic strips. He had a talent for sketching, and his caricatures of current movie stars were displayed in local shop windows. Following his father’s wishes that he become a lawyer, he enrolled in the Law Faculty in Rome, but never attended classes. Instead, he went to Nebini and got a job with a comics magazine. He was eventually put on the editorial staff of the satirical gazette, *Marc’ Aurelio*, a position that kept him safely out of the draft when Mussolini got Italy involved in World War II in 1940.

Three years later he met and subsequently married Giulietta Masini, a young actress, who, as anyone who saw her in “*La Strada*” in 1954 would attest, was the archetypal model of the sad clown-waif he was attracted to.

Fellini’s first film, which he co-directed, was *Variety Lights* in 1949, followed by *La Strada* (1954) and *Nights of Cabiria* (1957), which film critic Pauline Kael hailed as his finest work, and which was the inspiration for the Broadway hit musical *Sweet Charity*. Both it and *La Strada* won him Academy Awards for Best Foreign Film, but undoubtedly his most famous movie was *La Dolce Vita* in 1960 (even though Kael this time dismissed it as “a Catholic schoolboy’s fantasy of sin”).

Anton knew Fellini’s films inside out. The next two chronologically were his all-time favorites: *8 1/2* (1963) and *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965); *8 1/2* dealt with a filmmaker’s quest for self-understanding that struck a responsive chord, as did the magical light and dark contrasts of the cinematography. (Anton was tempted to design the sets for *NINE*, the 1982 Broadway musical based on it, when approached by the show’s director/choreographer Tommy Tune. By then they were close friends. But Anton eventually declined, the excuse being that the undertaking was too large. Bob Bethea elaborated, “...it was too much of what he was trying to get away from...he was more comfortable working small.”)

Robbie Anton’s work was the least derivative I’d ever seen, but it did pay homage to, along with Indian spiritualism and Japanese Bunraku, Fellini’s output, especially in the period after 1967, when, after recovering from an illness, diagnosed variously as pleurisy and a rare virus, Fellini’s interests turned to the strange

and occult. He hired Bernadino Zapponi, a Roman screenwriter whose idols were Franz Kafka and Edgar Allan Poe, as his collaborator, and the work became more surreal as it waxed autobiographical; beginning with *Fellini Satyricon* in 1970 (which he was promoting when he stopped at the Plaza, and which Kael again dismissed with “...We seem to be at a stoned circus”); then *The Clowns* (1971), “*Fellini’s Roma*” (a biographical travelog in 1972), and *Amarcord* (1971), another Oscar winner, he seemed to forsake linear narrative to express his characters’ experiences and thoughts subjectively, emphasizing the more spectacular and grotesque elements. Much the same could be said for Anton’s approach as his first fully realized piece took shape.

Robbie’s patient vigil back on the steps of the Plaza finally paid off when Fellini emerged, and he was able to confront him with his little figures, which he unwrapped right there. Peter Goldfarb, who witnessed the encounter, wrote, “Here was this fellow and those wonderful creatures... one with white face emerging from a black hood. Fellini, instinctively, was delighted and enchanted... definitely intrigued by Robbie. I know Fellini: a kind of spark had happened.”

Fellini adored Anton from the start, and invited him to attend the midnight preview of *Fellini Satyricon* as his guest. Reciprocating, Anton told him he had tickets for a rock concert earlier that evening, and asked if he would be interested in joining him. Fellini was delighted, and the two attended a sold-out Madison Square Garden concert of The Doors, featuring Jim Morrison.

The choice couldn’t have been more fortuitous. The event was made-to-order for Fellini’s tastes: The Doors was formed in 1965 by keyboardist Ray Manzarek and Jim Morrison in Venice, California, with guitarist Robby Krieger and drummer John Densmore. Morrison had chosen the name from Aldous Huxley’s book on mescaline, *The Doors of Perception*, which amply described the group’s intellectual pretensions and social habits. Of the group, Timothy White, in *Rock Stars* wrote, “Their intentions were deeply profound, but their music was fairly pedestrian, and the bulk of Morrison’s opaquely platitudinous lyrics was chucklehead word spinning.”

Morrison himself was the main draw. His sexual escapades and brushes with the law were front-page fodder for supermarket checkout counter tabloids, where he was gleefully pegged as “lewd” and “lascivious”. He considered himself a discerning intellectual, but his saturnalian appetites seemed to have no boundaries. “He’ll sleep with anything,” was a gibe often thrust at him. A behavioral charge leveled at him in court after a Miami concert in 1969 read, “..he did expose his penis and shake it” while on stage, and “did simulate acts of masturbation upon himself and oral copulation upon another.” He was reported to have drunk a girl friend’s blood after a night of champagne and cocaine somewhere in the south of France (it seemed she slashed her hand with a razor and he caught the drippings in a champagne glass); he wrote numerous suicide notes, which were also duly recorded publicly; and he fled city after city to fend off twenty-odd paternity suits that dogged him like his bad reviews. On July 3, 1971, he was found dead in a bathtub in his estranged wife’s house in Paris, apparently from a heart seizure. The long-haired dreamy “poet” with the face of a pouting cherub, called everything from the Lizard King to a dime-store Rimbaud, had only recently celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday.

Anton was drawn to types like Morrison almost as if to a magnet. He obviously found sexual stimulation from the darker forms of debauchery, and was constantly fighting to repress its impulses (probably one of the factors that impelled him to search for healing in odd places later.) But at the moment both he and Fellini were caught up in the carnal excitement of the surroundings. Fellini noted that the event was a true “*Satyricon*”—all those hippies: some sleeping off drugs, others applauding ecstatically, and still others openly making love in the aisles. To him that concert was the perfect place for such behavior—“ten thousand youngsters, heros and heroines [enough] for all the parts [in my film]”. (*Fellini Satyricon*, the movie, was greeted less enthusiastically by the press later that evening: Pauline Kael called it “Mondo Trasho”, and John Simon, “...a really bad film, terrible”).

Federico Fellini’s working credo could have been that of Anton, by substituting “puppet” for “actor”. He

insisted on complete control over the actors' interpretations. They were never allowed to clash with his own. And on film making, he said, "the dark set, when all the lights are out, exerts a fascination over me which has some very obscure origin. To put up ...the scenery with my own hands, to make up an actor, to dress him, to urge him to some movement, to some unforeseeable reaction, involves me totally." They were both childlike, rebellious, humorous, self-loathing and godlike: a "divine presence" they shared, and, along with all great artists, an involuntary attraction to death.

Robbie Anton moved from Brooklyn into a second floor apartment in a brownstone on Seventieth Street in Manhattan, the kind with the portly stone outer stairs and balustrades so characteristic of the architecture in the area just west of Central Park. There he worked on ways to present his finger puppets in context. In a *Soho Weekly News* interview with Lita Eliscu (February 20, 1975) he discussed that elementary period: "Originally, there was no structure at all, and the things that happened weren't conscious... I started getting ideas for particular characters—the first ones were really pure personal archetypes—I got the ideas for the characters with no real idea of what I wanted them to *do*, but once I made them, they just found what they needed to do and gradually, I started finding my story through the puppets.

He set up a "stage" in the corner of his bedroom, basically a semi-circular counter covered in black velvet with an overhang in front that concealed his seated lower body, making him visible only from the chest up in a black turtleneck shirt. Behind him was hung a black velvet drapery, all giving the effect of a deep dark box. At first he performed only for close friends and their associates. There was only room for a few at a time. But even later, when he was performing to a more standardized schedule, never more than eighteen were allowed in at once, and he continued to restrict audiences to colleagues and their guests. As his fame spread, however, he eventually had to admit others, although he was never comfortable with it. He told Eliscu, grinning, "It's strange, to share something so personal with eighteen people I don't know, in my bedroom... but I don't feel I have much choice.' He stops for a moment... 'the way I seem like God to my puppets... in this life, I feel *I* am a puppet.'" Restricting the number and type of audience was elitist, of course, and had an adverse result—before long *everyone* wanted to be among the elect and pandemonium preceded each performance as they all tried to muscle in. Many had to be turned away (by Bob Bethea, usually, who said he could sympathize with traffic cops), but the lucky ones were able to experience the same immediate quieting sensation on entering that every Anton "interior" somehow induced.

After the overhead lights were turned *off*, Anton's head and shoulders would appear up behind the tiny stage; the first thing he did was set out miniature lit black candles that, when he brought out each little figure, illuminated its face in such a way that the eyes seemed to blink and the mouth purse or smile. It was all in the flickering shadows caused by the flames, of course, but vivid imaginations caused viewers to swear it was magically induced. "How did you do that?" they'd ask, and he would reply, "It was the *spirit* in the fire." Whether the illusion was planned or serendipitous didn't matter; it was a masterful touch that he continued incorporating into all the shows. When asked years later about manipulation versus imagination, he said, "People are so often not aware that they are responsible—at least fifty percent—for the puppets having any life at all. When I'm alone with them, my puppets have no life for me. It is the audience—their *wish* for the puppets to live, mixed with my technical ability—that brings life to my stage" (*Scene*, February 1980).

Recorded music by Debussy and Rachmaninoff would be heard (the controls for everything were under the stage on a shelf, and manipulated by Anton's knees and feet), as visitors began pulling up chairs and stools to within a few feet of the performing area. All that was visible to them was his profiled head, hands, and the creatures and minuscule props he brought up from below. No words were ever uttered, but he could be seen solemnly mouthing encouragement or gentle admonitions to his charges along with an occasional shake of his head that spoke volumes.

He was learning to be a master illusionist, but his performance schedule was sporadic; he had other interests to deal with that stemmed from his background in stage design. John-Michael Tebalak, renowned for

adapting and musicalizing (with Stephen Schwartz) the Broadway musical GODSPELL in 1970, hired Anton to do the sets for a new work that he was directing titled ELIZABETH I, by playwright Paul Foster. It was an historical cartoon about events of her reign and ideas and ambitions underlying it, seen through the eyes of a company of sixteenth century street performers. It opened to general acclaim in April, 1972, with an excellent cast headed by Penelope Windust and Jeff Chandler, and made Anton (whose first name appeared in the credits as Robbie) the youngest set designer to date to work on Broadway.

That same year he created the set for the Off Broadway production of JESSE JAMES, produced by Stacy Keach and his brother James. Bob Bethea remembered it well: it was like a Louise Nevelson sculpture, only brown instead of black, all full of compartments and things that pulled out; things turned around and things turned into other things—simple wooden things turned into complex wooden things. “It was marvelous—a great set.” The play had a respectable run at the Bouwerie Lane Theatre, before the building was taken over by Eve Adamson and the Jean Cocteau Repertory Company. On a roll, apparently, later that season he designed and helped make some very large articulated puppets for the illfated Broadway flop DUDE (which, over the years, has acquired the distinction of having been probably the worst show to grace the Great White Way—ever. To prepare for it, the lovely Broadway Theatre was totally gutted so the stage area could be placed between rows one and eighteen of the orchestra, with participants and spectators sharing odd spaces in and around it, and the balconies were enlarged for playing purposes. Anyone unfortunate enough to see it during its five-day run couldn’t help but cringe at the ugliness that resulted. It lost a million dollars for its producers, Adela Holzer and her husband, and remained in memory only as the crossword puzzle answer to “What was the stupidest, most expensive dud in the history of American theater?”)

Anton had performed briefly before he set up his bedroom theater. In 1971 Ellen Stewart, as always, there with the seminal touch, invited him to appear at La MaMa. He did a small bit (still bearded from his Indian sojourn) with his hand puppets in *SHEKHINA (THE BRIDE)*, an adaptation of *THE DYBBUK*. She would have been glad to have taken him under her ample wing and been his “MaMa”, but he had already been warned about what being in her “family” involved, and valued his freedom too highly. He also created a magnificent large crow-like bird with which he interacted in a very brief cameo in a variety show there.

Robert Wilson admired Anton’s work enough to offer him space at the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds on Spring Street, where Anton was introduced to a wider segment of the experimental theater community. Gloria Orenstein, in her 1975 book *The Theater of the Marvelous* linked the two of them as opposite telescopic ends of the visionary theater experience, one inversely proportional to the other.

Anton, ever the loner, found that he liked best working and performing in his own created space, and by 1973, could only be seen in the Seventieth Street bedroom. Bob Bethea was there every night a performance took place, ushering in the guests and turning off the lights; Robbie was never seen before—or after—a show. As soon as the room was dark, he entered from another room and took his place behind the black “stage”. The shock of seeing his pale face and slender hands against the surrounding void when he struck a match was nothing short of inspired. And when he extinguished the last candle at the end, he disappeared back the way he came, leaving the audience with the vivid after-pictures of the resurrected “players” in the darkness until Bethea reached the light switch by the door.

For the better part of that year, Anton was joined by composer Elizabeth Swados to experiment with juxtaposing images and sounds. Fresh from a heady stint of creating unusual noises for Peter Brook, she brought with her all sorts of devices (some musical) to try out—everything from kitchen skillets to exotic bells and gongs, from instruments to hammer with and be hammered on, to singing sounds and bird calls. It was during her tenure, huddled with her paraphernalia on the floor in the corner of the room behind the performing cubical, that I was first exposed to Anton’s theater. It was at the persuasion of Maurice McClelland who, at the time, was his most ardent champion. McClelland was one of those inveterate do-gooders who, in their zealous philanthropic march across the heathen landscape, scatter extensive debris in their wakes. He had a

deceptively gentle demeanor, with pale eyes, pale hair, pale hands, and a softly seductive voice with a built-in self-deprecating laugh that was more chilling than jolly. He appeared out of the West, and espoused every unpopular cause and underdog like it was a calling. He also had an incredible nose for sniffing out offbeat talent in unlikely places.

One of the first important groups Maurice McClelland brought to my attention was the previously described National Theatre of the Deaf. McClelland had to deal with deafness in his own family and was interested in developing the performing potential of actors who were hearing impaired. It was he who persuaded Robbie Anton to get involved with the International Visual Theatre project for deaf performers in Amsterdam while the two of them were staying in Paris in 1976.

He was instrumental in bringing El Teatro Campesino back to New York and our attention in the mid-1970s. A wildly eclectic band of former farmworkers who first got together on the picket lines in Delano, California, during the *Huelgo* (the United Farm Workers strike) in 1965, they developed a brand of street theater under the direction of Luis Valdez that was unique in the field. In the beginning they had no props, scenery, scripts, or even stages. Reality, they liked to say, was their theater. To ease the tensions of the strikers and counteract the bitterness of the long, humorless struggle, El Teatro created a form of broad slapstick comedy using familiar stock farm characters—the patron (land owner), the contractor, the scab, etc. At first everything was improvised, but soon they developed their own dramatic form, the *acto*, “somewhere between Brecht and *Cantinflas*,” that dramatized the social plight of Chicano family life in an Anglo-dominated society.

Another McClelland “find” was The Family, a performing group that got its start in Westchester, N.Y. prisons. Marvin Felix “Pancho” Camillo was a local social worker in that county in 1972 when he discovered the playwright Miguel Piñero in Sing Sing during a theater workshop he was conducting. Camillo put together a troupe of former convicts—fourteen to twenty-five in number, depending on who was out at the time—and started work on Piñero’s first play *SHORT EYES*. Later adding a few experienced players, *SHORT EYES* was performed all over Manhattan and the other boroughs, mostly in churches, and The Family finally settled down at the Riverside Church in 1973 as its resident company.

Any review of Maurice McClelland’s performing discoveries would have to include one last group that was, probably, the most unusual of all that I ever saw: The Iowa Theater Lab. Founded by Rick Zank in 1970, it existed for its first few years at the University of Iowa’s Center for New Performing Arts and was funded by the University—hence its name. When that funding ended, the Lab moved from Iowa City to Baltimore, Maryland in 1975, using it as a base from which it toured extensively. Convinced that “theatre can be a genuine source of physical and imaginative energy for its audience,” Zank attempted to heighten “the audience’s awareness of sounds and silence, visual detail, and subjective variations in the sense of time.” The company, at least in its initial productions, consisted only of male performers. There were never more than two or three in each piece, and they performed, for the most part, totally naked, weaving in and out of each other in silent, ritual-like movements; now confrontational and aggressive, then tender and caressing. Usually the audience was forced to stand in a tight circle around the players, at times literally breathing down their necks and catching flicks of sweat from the undulating bodies. Played in total silence under soft red lights that diffused everything, the performances were the closest thing to having sexual intercourse that anyone could experience without touching another body. It was heady stuff and only a limited number of spectators was allowed at a performance, so the appeal was limited, like Anton’s theater, but once seen, not easily forgotten.

Maurice had invited Arthur and me, along with Martha Coigney and her husband Rudy, and perhaps a few others, to what resulted in a command performance of Robbie Anton’s first hour-and-a-half long show (there would be three shows in all, two with the finger puppets and one—unfinished at his death—with stage, fighting, and no puppets. None of them were titled). Martha was the director of International Theatre Institute of the U.S. (she would later head the world organization) and McClelland’s immediate superior. I had gotten to know her quite well in the past several years since we began funding the organization. She was an anachro-

nism in the field. Tall, stately, somewhat imperious, but with humor, she was a staunch catalyst in the messy, spilled-over world of the avant garde. She knew all the angles, but was, herself, as straight and dependable as an Arizona highway. Our annual business-cum-gossip meetings over Dover sole at Sardi's were unmitigated fun.

Seating was no problem for the few of us attending that evening, but I could see it might be for a larger audience. Pulling up assorted chairs and stools close enough to be able to see the miniature stage would be very difficult. What was needed was a permanent platform with stools of varying heights: low in front and graduating upward toward the back, perhaps six across in three rows, making a maximum of eighteen viewing perches. I thought about it during the performance, and several days later called Anton to ask if he had thought about such an arrangement. As it turned out, he had, and even had a sculptor-friend, Richard Hamner, create a design for it. It was very much as I envisioned it, with rubber-padded stools anchored to a plywood base that could be easily dismantled for travel. All that was needed was proper funding to begin construction. And that was how we got involved with the Anton theater, by giving him a grant for the purpose through the agency we arranged to handle him, Performing Artservices.

The performance itself was a revelation that, at times, quite literally had us holding our breath. (Bob Bethea said that after most performances,.. "the audience was sated: moved, exhausted, elated. Everything so tiny... the slightest movement was exaggerated. People would lose concept of time, forget to breathe... *faint*. It happened more than once." [Conversation with Genii Grassi for *Theater-Ex*, Spring 1986]). In the beginning, after the "footlights" were lit, all we saw was Anton's face and hands, very white in a black void (he was smooth-shaven now with closely cropped hair.) A small platform, a few inches high, was placed on the center of the stage with a flask of water on it. A tree appeared beside the platform. Then we heard a scratching sound under the stage, followed by the sight of a horseshoe crab's beak climbing up from behind. It crawled over to



ROBERT ANTON AND PUPPET

Photo by Ann Mundy Courtesy: I.T.I.

the flask and drank from it, then shuddered and fell, shedding its shell and giving birth to another, smaller beak that unravelled to become the hair covering a porcelain-faced woman's head. She gave birth to an even tinier crab, which she nestled in one arm as she floated away on the discarded shell, carrying the tree in the other. A tiny shopping cart filled with miniature trash—rugs, tin plates, newspapers, bicycle tires, plunger, all in scale—next rolled down a ramp on the side of the stage. Anton picked up a black bowl and shook dust from it on the debris, which trembled and opened up to reveal a bag lady dressed in rags, pearls, and a rain hat. Scratching herself, she looked up and, seeing Anton, placed a probing hand, then her whole head into his mouth, searching for goodies for her collection. He offered her a cigarette, which she smoked sitting on the overturned bowl while fiddling with her straggly grey hair. She, too, started trembling, and arose from the bowl only to find she had laid an egg on it. Anton took the egg away, and sent her packing back up the ramp.

The white egg was placed in the bowl again and set atop a black leather box. A headless man entered, found the egg, and fitted it on his neck. Then he struck at it with his small hands until it cracked open and fell away, leaving a head with “no-face,” or, as Maurice McClelland explained in his detailed account of the first of the Anton shows printed in *The Drama Review* (February 1975), called “The Puppet Theatre of Robert Anton” (encapsulated here with his permission) “...what Rilke called ‘the no-face that is left when a person has worn out all his faces.’” Anton indicated the black box, and the man opened it and found a criminal's head, which he eagerly exchanged for his drab one. But in the process of removing it from the box, he saw that there was another head in there, attached to the same black body. That one was of a woman whose mouth was open and tongue hanging out in lust. The man attacked her, only to knock off her wig, leaving but a few strands of grey hair. He recoiled briefly, then continued his assault, as she continued to advance upon him, lasciviously. It was time for “God” to intervene, and Anton's hand (now to our eyes, accustomed to the minuscule scale, seeming like that of a giant) pointed toward the box. All the heads went back into it and it closed, as the man's severed body exited, waving its arms in the air.

The broken shell was left on stage, and out of it emerged a “bird-woman”—a creature gowned in black sequins and sporting a headdress of white plumes that hid most of her face, except for her sharp beak-nose, with which she began prodding the space around her. When she reached Anton's hand, he grasped the beak, pulling off what was a mask. Underneath was a gorgeous “chanteuse,” with stage makeup and diamond accessories. Anton held up the mask for her to see, after which she shook her head slowly, backed off a few steps, and fled to the wings.

The next vignette was a sleeping woman under a black veil, whom Anton aroused only to have her rub her beautiful face and black hair against his hand, then kiss it, and manipulate his fingers into a passionate embrace that encompassed her whole head. Bumping back and forth against the palm in a simulated act of love, she reached a climax, fell back spent, and returned to sleep again under the veil.

An old, but once beautiful lady in a gold crown advanced down a raised ramp, coughing heavily into a blood-stained kerchief, and staggered toward center stage, where an oval mirror reflected the images of a crystal beaker with a lit candle floating in it, a glass bowl, and a clear flask of rose water. She raised her hideously wrinkled face and hands up toward Anton, pleadingly. He poured a few drops of milk into the rose water, heated it over the flame, and passed it to her to drink. Nothing happened. So he reached with tiny forceps under her dress and extracted a bloody organ, leaving it and the instrument on the mirror. He removed her crown and pulled out her brain from an opening in the back of her head, still attached by a silver thread, and passed it several times over the flame. She expired, just as the smell of incense began to permeate the room. He lifted up her gown with one hand, to reveal his other holding one red and one white rose. Another ramp appeared on the opposite side from the first, and at its foot, Anton laid the flowers as the miniature klieg lights dimmed to darkness.

That was the prolog to the piece. Following was the main body of the story and an epilog. The lights came up to reveal an altar draped with red and gold brocade and a globe of wine on either side. The three-tiered

crown of a pope arose from below, followed by his body encased in gold cloth studded with jewels. He wore diminutive sun glasses (marvels in themselves) that indicated his eyesight was so bad he had to grope to find the altar. He blessed the audience at the same time that a large hand sprinkled him with dust. Like all previous “dustees,” he shivered and sank to the stage floor. One by one, the altar, then all his outer finery were stripped away. One tier of the crown after another was removed, until he was left a groveling, bald-headed blind man, searching for the missing altar. Anton’s hand again appeared dangling a chain of little keys in front of the man’s face, but he couldn’t see them. With an index finger Anton touched the figure’s forehead and dangled the keys again. The man lashed out at the sound, waving them away, and exited grandly.

The next scene had a gypsy enter (to the sounds of Swados’ bells and gongs) wearing a tasseled brown scarf decorated with bits of mirror above her many skirted costume. She made her way to a central stone altar around which were placed copper, pewter, and earthen pots, “no bigger than a human eye,” filled with fresh flowers, leaves and fruits. On the altar were incense sticks around a central ritual object. She began a slow dance around the altar, lighting candles and the incense, and moving her clasped hands upward in supplication. Dust from the giant hand drifted down on her as she touched the sacred central object, and she was shorn of her finery. Her hair was stripped away and rouge washed from her face by a little sponge. It was the face of the departed pope. She, too, was offered the set of keys, which she greedily lunged at. But they were out of her reach, and she gave up trying to get them, exiting shaking her head sadly.

A table was placed center stage, and some postage-stamp size leather-bound books and manuscripts were heaped on it. An old scholarly gentleman with medieval velvet cap atop his grey curls rose from below, carrying more books, maps, and the Torah. He then reached for a huge volume he could barely lift, and placed it on the table in front of him, opening it up and becoming absorbed with its contents. He wasn’t aware of the giant hand sprinkling dust on him from above, as he collapsed across the open pages. His cap and curls were removed, and he, too was shown the set of keys, which were whisked away just as he was about to clasp them. He followed them as they led him over to the ramp where the two roses rested. He took them up in his arms, “buried his face in their petals” and turned and walked jubilantly off in the opposite direction.

In the next scene a monk in fur robes sat on an ice-covered mountain top, meditating amidst falling snow. Anton’s hand appeared behind him, each finger capped with a gold cuff and a little dancing hand. The gold head of a demon arose from them, and it jabbed at the monk to get his attention, but couldn’t. The monster then offered him gold, food, music, and fondled his sex organ, all to no avail. It then built “a temple of monstrosities” around the unmoving figure, activating them wildly until the all-knowing hand above scattered dust over the action, making everything disappear but the solitary monk. His fur hat was removed to reveal the familiar face of the old pope, but he no longer recognized either the hand waved in front of him or the shiny keys. He was finally blind to this world. A white veil was lowered over him and he became one with the icy mountain.

A small box filled with white sand was placed center stage. A man who was chained to a bloody rock was trying to free himself. His eyes bulged above a long white beard, and his bleeding forehead was wrapped in a stained bandage. He dug into the sand and retrieved a crystal sphere, a prism, and a ring his head fit through, but he discarded them and kept digging. The sand began to move under his hand, and a silver chalice arose, too large for the man to grasp. So Anton took it up for him, and the man kissed his hand. The chain that bound him snapped, and wine began spurting from the bloody rock. Anton caught it up in the chalice, and offered it to the man, who gestured that Anton drink it first. They shared it, and he touched Anton’s face in gratitude. He was shown the keys which he now could reach easily, and they were placed on his wrist. His beard and bandages were then removed and we found it was the same figure we’d seen through all the previous metamorphoses. He and the desert box were removed from the stage, that once again fell dark.

In the epilog, the little central character, wearing the gold keys on his wrist, gave them to Anton, and pointed to his own chest. Anton nodded knowingly, and laid the man on the stage face up, offering him some wine.

When he unlocked the man's chest with one of the keys and opened it up, a loud ticking sound occurred. Anton donned a black glove and thrust it inside, parting away layers of red silk lining, to reach seven blood-red roses, which were placed in a row on a ramp that folded out toward the audience. A red velvet rope was extricated and attached to the wire holding the keys. As it was pulled out further, it bore with it a "reddish stone, a red branch, a red lizard skin, a red starfish, red feathers and red fur" that turned in space overhead.

In a grand reprise, the pope's hats were brought out and placed by the roses, then the gypsy's scarf, the scholar's wig and cap, the monk's peaked fur hat, and, finally, the blood-soaked bandages from the desert. A red silk rope was pulled from out the man's innards. It changed to orange, then yellow, green, blue indigo, and violet, making a rainbow string. At the end was attached a silver thread that came out more slowly and stopped. Anton indicated it to the man, who nodded his head. Anton bit through it, severing it. The ticking stopped.

A white apparition then floated up from inside the man's body wearing a white turban, kissed his head, and bowed to Anton, who began unraveling the turban. The center of the tiny head was a large eye, staring out at the audience. The apparition lay down beside the man's gutted body, and Anton removed the black glove and placed it gently over them. The candles were extinguished, one by one, and just before utter darkness returned, a clear little bell sounded. Then all was silent and black until Bob Bethea turned up the room lights. Robbie had vanished.

There was no applause. We all remained seated, very still, very pensive, then slowly left with only whispered goodbyes. I don't remember having ever discussed the contents of the piece with anyone. To each of us who were fortunate enough to witness a performance, it meant something uniquely different and deeply personal and, somehow, couldn't be shared. Some of the satisfaction derived from the overall perfection of every detail. Bethea said Anton was constantly scouring the city for miniature items to use as props; everything had to be exact scale, even to tiny cuts of meat, papayas, and fresh roses. The heads of the characters, however were designed and made by Anton alone. Works of art in themselves (and some were actually displayed as art at galleries like Bette Stoler's), they were mostly fashioned of clay, fired and painted by hand; and always created in private—no one ever saw the actual process. Bethea was usually the first to see a newly finished figure which Robbie would show off to him at night after Bob returned from his day job.

Of Elizabeth Swados' involvement, Anton told Lita Eliscu "She was really the midwife—the one who was instrumental in giving the puppets life. The sounds she made, they were the first sounds that they responded to.' After nearly a year of intense collaboration, though, he realized that the stories were being told by the puppets, and they no longer needed sound, so the collaboration stopped."

Swados was the first to invite "special" people to see the performances, followed soon after by Maurice McClelland's "crowd." (Martha Coigney remembered Swados persuading her to attend by promising, "We won't make you shoot up!") Joseph Chaikin was an early enthusiast, as was Jean-Claude van Itallie, who would later become Anton's closest male confidant. Actors were especially attuned to his work, like the diminutive Linda Hunt who was attracted to the tininess of his theater universe—"no longer than a dining room table;" Michael Moriarty, who called him a theatrical genius with a "piercing nakedness." Susan Sontag, essayist and all-around intellectual, became a devoted fan, as did her son, editor David Rieff, to whom he was essentially a "pagan artist."

Another devotee was the famed actress and teacher Stella Adler, who brought a whole coterie of performers, artists, writers, and New York glitterati to Anton's studio. In her early seventies when she first arrived, she was still active in two schools that bore her name, one in New York and the other in Los Angeles (and she would remain involved until her death in 1993 at age 91). Born into a noted acting family, she appeared on stage first at the age of four in Yiddish Theater. In the 1930s she was a prominent founder of the Group Theater, where she was a leading actress, and espoused the methods of Konstantin Stanislavsky. After personally meeting the Russian theorist in 1934, she tried to teach exploration of the characters' emotional lives

that her students were portraying, instead of the more generally accepted Method training of the time that emphasized actors' own personal emotional experiences. Among her most prominent students were Marlon Brando, Shelley Winters, Robert De Niro and Candice Bergen.

Adler would get so wrapped up in Anton's theater that she would lean forward on her stool and *talk* to the puppets during the performance. I watched her doing that one evening, and the effect was both eerie and astonishing. Anton would very subtly turn a puppet's face toward her and make its head nod or move its little arm in a gesture to her. She had him set up his theater a number of times at her New York conservatory and perform for their invited guests. Not all of them were as transfixed as she. I was at one performance there when Schuyler Chapin, then the head of Lincoln Center, and later dean of Juilliard, was seated in the front row, and, when Robbie made a puppet piss into a pan (a clever tube and syringe device, he stood up and left the room in a snit. Bethea told me others reacted violently like that sometimes at performances on Seventieth Street also. There were aspects of his shows that made certain people very edgy, "So extreme that it was obvious they were going through some kind of catharsis or something. It was frightening. Most people were enthralled by them, even when they didn't understand them. But every once in a while one would flip out. Like—his father kind of did—and his mother. Maybe it hits home on such an unconscious level that that person is not equipped to deal with it... once in a while it drove them insane."

Several people claimed to have arranged Robert Anton's first European festival appearance in Nancy, France in 1975: David Rieff said it was his mother, Susan Sontag; Bette Stoler said it was definitely not Sontag, but most likely Maurice McClelland and the International Theatre Institute. The fact was, he did represent the United States there, so it was very likely the latter. McClelland, in any event, was with him in Nancy and later in Rome. Anton's performances at the Nancy Festival were some of its highlights, in part because so few could attend any of them at one time; there was a stampede for tickets following favorable word-of-mouth acclaim. After the festival, McClelland recalled, Jack Lang (who would become a long-term Minister of Culture beginning in 1982 under President Francois Mitterrand) introduced them to someone owning an old wine cellar who let them create a small theater out of it for Robbie for one performance only. Colette Godard, critic for *Le Monde* saw it and wrote, "I think that this spectacle is beyond critical analysis. One can speak of it neither in terms of theater nor of psychiatry. One is compelled to remain alone with one's own reactions and attitudes before this unique manner of interpreting human experience, of coming to terms with life." French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing was there, with Michel Guy, Minister of Culture, who offered Anton a large grant to do a new show for the 1976 Festival d'Automne. (Robbie liked the space in the wine cave so much he was given two more to expand into.)

That same year (1975) Anton performed at the Teatro Argentina in Rome, Italy, and also at Ritsaert ten-Cate's Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam. He then went on to Paris, where the Minister of Culture made good on his earlier offer. Not only was he given an enormous grant, but also the use of an incredible thirteenth century castle outside Paris, called the Château de Vincennes. Anton loved every inch of it, from the carved stone spiral staircases to the parapets looking out over the horse guards. He began to build his set slowly, methodically, from material he found around him in the gate tower, which was a far larger space than his theater had ever before occupied. And it was fraught with memories: the last people in the tower had been German soldiers during the occupation. So he based his work on the concept of imprisonment. Two months later his piece was ready. During that time, McClelland claimed that he'd only gone outside twice (his food was delivered), and he slept alone in an adjoining alcove.

The "Paris Show," as the new piece was labeled, was the closest to "grand" theater that Robbie Anton came, even though, by regular standards, it was still minuscule. There were three separate stages, with fixed stools of various heights. An enormous arched fireplace became the proscenium for Act One. At the side of it, a small gargoyle's face had been mutilated, so Robbie repaired it with his own likeness. That act involved birth, and the set consisted of a dining room-type round table with stools around it in a semicircle; Act Two was

performed in another archway made of welded metal by collaborator Jeremy Lebensohn, with a cemetery in one corner of the room, dried tiger lily stems placed about as “trees,” a tiled pool of water, and a yellow painted road with an alchemist’s pot heating over a real fire.

Anton appeared in silhouette behind a “shadow screen,” his finger-shadows climbing a ladder and then leaping off into space. The viewers then saw his own fingers float across the air (he was in black to the neck and wrists) and disappeared behind the Act One set. In a grottoesque space, a bird-like female gave birth from her loins to a child looking much like Anton. Her mouth opened wide as if to devour her offspring, but the baby escaped in an “air boat” that snaked through the air again to the Act Two space. The audience followed Anton dutifully from one set to another without being told to do so, keeping strict silence. There they found the pool. Two pairs of legs (Anton’s fingers)—a male and a female—made sexual advances toward each other: an Adam and Eve in underground Eden. The male slipped off a little bathing suit from the female’s body, and they jumped into the pool, making joyous love. Afterwards they lolled beside it, happily spent. An oven-like contraption flew in above them, like some weird spacecraft. Trapped inside, in a wire cage, was the Anton-clone the audience had been following since birth, now an adult. As the craft soared over centerstage, a bell rattled and a blast of steam rose from out of its top.

The “finger” lovers were replaced by a beggar woman in horrible tatters, who, when peeling off her outer garments, turned into a nun. When the nun’s outfit was reversed, she became a chain-smoking, flashy society matron in sequins and diamonds, who hacked and coughed herself to death. Anton wrapped her limp body back into the sumptuous cape (that, when re-reversed, became that of the begging nun again) and carefully lifted her out of sight.

Bob Bethea told of receiving an amusing letter from Anton during that period, relating an incident that occurred one night during that second act. All of the female figures that appeared were, in some way or another, his mother. His parents were visiting France at the time and were in attendance at the performance. It seemed that his mother had been having some health problems, and when she saw the decadent matron (an obvious likeness of herself) succumb and be shrouded in the nun’s habit, “she literally fainted in her chair. Passed right out there in the second act... It was obviously a strong experience for his family. They tried to understand and love him, but, face it, he was an alien. There were so many things that were pointing toward his acceptance and fame in the world of performing even then. But, somehow, they never bought it. They [still] thought that someday he would stop playing with those ‘little dolls’ and grow up...”

The third act, in yet another alcove of the tower room to which the audience had to move, was set in a sleazy cabaret, complete with blinking lights and neon. A two-foot high skeleton with a grotesquely leering smile, decked out with a high feathered hat, peach-colored ostrich plumes jutting from each hip joint, a purple boa around her scrawny shoulders, and a small red heart pendant dangling on a gold chain down from the center of the pelvis, did a suggestive dance to Duke Ellington’s “The Mooch.” The dance combined all the Anton elements of ghastly mockery as well as campy burlesque—horrible fun!

The flying Anton-faced puppet reappeared, out of the spaceship now, and a cruel confrontation developed, the skeleton seeming to scream, “How can you do this to me?” And the Anton-puppet emotionlessly indicating that he could do as he pleased with her, and would. And with that the dancing skeleton disappeared.



FEMALE PUPPET BY ROBERT ANTON

Photo by Ann Mundy Courtesy: I.T.I.

Anton had always been obsessed with the idea of flight. He spoke to intimates about his dreams of being able to fly, prompting his close identification with the legendary Ganymede figure of mythology. He saw himself as that beautiful Greek youth transported to the realms of the gods and then being immortalized himself among the stars of the heavens. So in this piece, he seemed to portray man's flight from ugliness into

the metaphysical, overcoming even the “baseness” of birth itself, and turning the world from reality into illusion. In the final scene the finger-shadows returned behind another screen to climb the ladder-shadow once more. Only this time, they paused momentarily on the topmost rung before leaping off into oblivion, pondering their eventual release and redemption.

The Festival crowds were huge, and Anton’s theater became very elitist. His name seemed to be on all the theatergoers’ lips. In Paris he was treated as a superstar. People followed him in the streets, offering him all kinds of outrageous proposals. His budget was the same as other companies, and since he was the only performer (and they had as many as thirty or forty), he had enormous resources comparatively, which drove him crazy because he couldn’t spend even a portion of it. His theatrical needs and his personal tastes were very simple. He lived in his “marble tower” like a monk.

Susan Yankowitz first saw his work there, and that was when their close relationship began. She recalled his being treated as a celebrity—what the French called “le petit genie Americain”—and articles about him appeared frequently in the press. Guy Demur in *Le Nouvel Observateur* wrote, “Robert Anton is at once an illusionist, a puppetmaster of genius, a surgeon, a tamer, a maker of miracles, a teacher.” Matthieu Galey wrote in the *Journal D’Informa*, “The adventure is mystic and is in direct communication with another world. Each evening a soul offers itself; a miraculous gift.”

Anton didn’t care for French people, so he not only remained sequestered, he also continued to create out of frustration and inner turmoil. Maurice McClelland was with him through much of that span, and said that the woman who became the performing skeleton in the night club had always been a soul image for Anton—very harsh, very corrupt—and now that she was out visibly, the experience was painful for him. “He didn’t make a show for a long time after. Not liking parties, crowds, he once said [on being invited to one] he’d only come if I would do what the Egyptians did: when everybody had enough to drink, carry a corpse through the room.”

In all, Anton remained abroad almost two years, mostly working on his new piece. But he did participate in the big International Visual Theatre (IVT) project in 1976, at the urging of a young Frenchman who was involved, Jean Gremion: through it, deaf American theater people were taken to perform and attend performances in Europe.

Robbie Anton returned to New York in January 1977, and performed his Paris show first in an apartment he rented on Eighty-first Street and later in Richard Hamner’s studio on Spring Street on Soho, just a few blocks from where he was introduced at Robert Wilson’s theater years before. Hamner was the artist/sculptor who had designed the seating arrangements, and had worked wonders in creating the most unusual spaces in his loft (I recall a very dramatic oriental-style moon gateway at the entrance). Yankowitz was involved with Hamner at the time, and her friendship with Anton blossomed (she, too, had recently returned from Europe). “...we were very close, but with, you know, a certain curtain between us, because my life was very different. Now Richard and Robbie—there was a bond between them as well. Richard was also very—weird. So there was a kind of three-way connection. What he saw in me I never quite figured out. Maybe what he saw in me was some answering darkness, which I suspect may have been it, but was not articulated; or [maybe]... he saw in me somebody very solid, and not judgmental about anything, which I tend not to be. It seems to me that people open up to me very naturally. I don’t know if I was a solid person for him or a like person....”

The Spring Street performing space made easier access for audiences, and when he presented his shows (which was still sporadically), there were lines of patient standees waiting for no-show tickets. Bob Bethea again acted as the (unpaid) host for most of them. The first act was played out in one area of the loft; then, as in the Paris production, the audience got up and moved to another little stage for the second act, and again to a third performing space for the last act. The loft had huge wide windows that looked out over lower New York. For the first and third acts they were covered with black drapery; but during the skeleton dance in Act Two they were bared to reveal the surrounding Soho facades. Lit dramatically by the neon and street lights

below, the buildings made an appropriately sinister background for the cabaret scene, augmented by eerie winking lights within the room that found echoes in the distant city nightscape above and beyond the rooftops.

The European interval had added a glamorous luster to Anton's reputation. Like so many young American talents, he found an immediate response abroad that, it seemed, was almost obligatory for gaining any recognition or acceptance at home. Local newspapers took increasing more notice of him as something other than an odd-ball cult figure. He won the *Soho News* Arts Award in 1979, and decided, after discussions with Performing Artservices, to take his show on the road. With another grant from us, he bought a large Land Rover, and set about designing a collapsible traveling theater that could be folded up and stored in it (including stools!). It was a marvel of space planning, and even had sculptural elements reminiscent of the clever set he made for the Keach brothers' production of *JESSE JAMES* at the Bouwerie Lane.

Thus, the Robert Anton Theater was seen from Tanglewood, Massachusetts, to his home town of Fort Worth, Texas, where he landed in February 1980. For the local press it was a good excuse to trot out the hometown-boy-makes-good clichés: Joy G. Spiegel, in *Scene Magazine* (February 17, 1980), started things off with "...In France, he is Robert Anton...—the little American genius—whose small world is a large triumph of theatrical creativity. Now, for the first time, his native Fort Worth is finding out why—and what happened to plain Robert Anton, the gifted kid whose perplexing mania for miniaturism hardly anyone could have dreamed could carry him to acclaim in world capitals here and abroad... How did the thirty-year old Anton emerge from a typical Texas family to become the personification of the theater of the intimate? Why, among 150,000 people attending the International Theatre Festival in Nancy, France, 1975, did journalist J. Gousseland write in *Le Point*: 'In spite of a very limited exposure (Anton's spectacle was viewed by only 216 people), these strange ceremonies will remain the most memorable and fruitful...' Etc., etc.

Another interview in that same magazine gave an apt physical description of him as he appeared in 1980: "His close-cropped head is thrown back in genuine delight, remembering [his first little proscenium theater given him by his parents]. The child in him has come out to play. His five-foot-ten height is deceptively diminished by a slender, almost fragile frame. From a serious-looking boy/man's face his deep brown eyes seem to reflect the wisdom and the sadness of ages. But when he laughs, they light up with the kind of humor that allows him to poke fun at his own intensity and stand back to see himself objectively."

Bette Stoler recalled a lot of antic behavior in Fort Worth. For example, she and Robbie drove from Trader Vic's to Trader Vic's all over Texas, sampling every exotic drink available, with a penchant for those containing "the most garbage and topped with tiny paper parasols." At some point he ate the camellia floating in a particularly disgusting concoction and was deathly sick for days. She noted that many people regarded him as eccentric, even in New York. But she didn't, thinking nothing of it, for example, when he insisted they go to the Russian Tea Room on Central Park South every night for several weeks for drinks, and showed up appropriately attired in suit and tie—and bare feet thrust into rubber flip-flops.

In 1980 Anton, feeling the need to distance himself from New York, and, as Yankowitz put it, "this really horrid [secret] life he was living" that none of us knew about, he gave up his apartment and moved to Wilmington, Vermont. He was always seeking ways to "get healthy," and there he lived above a Klara Simpla health food-healing emporium, run by a woman named Fay, who, by the accounts of friends who visited him there during the next few years, was a truly extraordinary person; even though he lived an almost hermetic existence, he felt greatly healed by her proximity. Bette Stoler recalled he fixed up the apartment over the store—"very bright and cheery." And, when guests did visit, he was always in a positive mood (this was some time before he was diagnosed with AIDS). She remembered one time they went to see the movie "E.T." together and enjoyed it immensely.

He returned to New York sporadically for one-time only performance (one already mentioned took place at Stella Adler's conservatory, when Schuyler Chapin walked out), and went abroad again in 1981 to participate

in the Cologne Festival (Germany). His work was received there much as it had been in Paris—with great acclaim. The magazine *Der Spiegel* (July 6, 1981), in a section titled *Szene* (translated into English by Srigette Altman), explained: “At the Cologne Festival of Theatre of the World, which ended Sunday with several record-breaking attendances, Puppeteer Robert Anton of New York, established a superlative of his own. In twelve performances, exactly 216 people saw his theatre. Easily, he could have accomplished a multiple in public attendance, but the mysterious ‘world in a shoebox’ which he has created, is so small and delicate that it does not allow more than eighteen viewers at one time. These viewers are abducted by the thirty year old Anton, a body and soul puppeteer.”

When he returned to New York from his Vermont hiatus, he took a large loft on Fifteenth Street and Fifth Avenue. Stoler, who moved in with him, described it as “tremendous—probably 6,000 square feet. It took up practically a whole floor, except for a small pied-a-terre in the front someone else occupied. There was a very impressive entrance hall. Then to the right there was a kitchen, and straight back, a very, very large room with two levels—a living room, really. To the left was a bedroom and bath. [Continuing on] there was another bedroom, and straight ahead was his studio, which was very large and well equipped.” He cloistered himself there much as he had in the tower at Vincennes, alternately working on his newest “show” (the proscenium stage) and watching old movies on TV, to which he was still addicted.

The studio was big enough for him and Tommy Tune to play basketball in. The two had become fast friends and spent much time together on Anton’s return. Even Robbie’s declining the offer to create the sets for Tune’s award-winning hit show, *NINE* (the one based on Fellini’s film “8 1/2” that opened at the Forty-sixth Street Theatre May 9, 1982, and ran 732 performances) didn’t dampen their relationship. Very likely Tune, ten years his senior, embodied all Anton’s concepts of Show Biz pizzazz and Broadway glamour. He was certainly emerging as a theater luminary.

Thomas James Tune (his real name) was originally from Houston, Texas, the son of an oil industry worker and a housewife. The six-foot-six giant couldn’t remember a time he wasn’t tap dancing. At five he was enrolled in the Emmamae Horn School of Dance, and, except for a six-month time out as a teenager, when his bones were growing so quickly he was forced to walk with crutches, he never stopped hoofing. He directed and choreographed musicals in high school and at the University of Texas, where he majored in performing arts. His dream was to dance in the chorus of a Broadway show, but soon after landing in New York, his first job was in the touring company of *IRMA LA DOUCE*. He made the great White Way in *BAKER STREET* in 1965. From then on, he was never out of work: *THE BOY FRIEND* (1971), *HELLO, DOLLY!*, *SEESAW* (1973), in which he won a Tony for Best Featured Actor. His directing credits, besides *NINE*, included *THE BEST LITTLE WHOREHOUSE IN TEXAS* (1978), *GRAND HOTEL*, and *THE WILL ROGERS STORY*. He won nine Tony’s in ten years.

For me, most of the musicals he did (except *GRAND HOTEL*) were bubble-head pap. But his production of Caryl Churchill’s stunning 1981 play on sexual identity titled *CLOUD 9*, was a show I felt could contend with any other serious entries that year, or any other. Although he was to be Robbie Anton’s closest male associate in his last years (after Jean-Claude van Itallie), he, like Bob Bethea, was never made aware of Anton’s fatal condition. To them both, the shock of his death was staggering.

Ellen Stewart had wanted Robbie to be one of her “dah-lin’s” since she first encountered his shy, elfin smile. Now she would have the honor of having the last tribute paid to him at the place where he may have given his first public performance. She and Jean-Claude van Itallie planned the memorial, with van Itallie in charge of the details. It was he who wrote the obituary, very likely so that others who knew Anton, but didn’t know he was dead, could share his own enormous grief. There was no question it was all done out of love. But some close friends saw it as a self-serving scheme: Bette Stoler believed van Itallie betrayed Robbie’s trust in even making the incident public. She claimed, as did Bob Bethea and others, that it was a blatant violation of his last wishes—that only his closest friends know the details of his condition and final actions (and, hopefully,

try to understand his inability to confide any of it to them sooner.) The gathering of the thirteen mentioned in his will at his loft several days after his passing was all there was supposed to be in the way of tribute paying. The incident caused a rift between van Itallie and the others—Stoler never communicated with him again—and some vowed not to attend the memorial. But eventually they changed their minds, agreeing that, to those not in the know, their absence would be taken as unseemly.

Van Itallie, for his part, had carefully omitted mention of AIDS in the obituary, and it was not spoken of at the gathering. That incensed other attendees, most of whom, by then, had learned the truth. Susan Yankowitz told of being next to playwright William Hoffman, who was, at the time, working on *AS IS*, his groundbreaking drama about the effects of it on gay companions.

“He was simply furious that people were not made aware.” (Susan, herself, was disappointed that more of them were not dressed in white, as she was, in deference to Anton’s trademark black costume.)

But, all misunderstandings aside, the main reason for being there was to share in acts of healing—something Robbie actively sought for himself and administered to his little subjects, and something friends mentioned in tribute: “He was [always] looking for some sort of healing, both physical and spiritual.”

— Susan Yankowitz

“He was working mainly with lights and color [in his last, unfinished project]. He was a color “feeler”—he’d been that in his past lives also (he had really strong memory of having done that in the past). And so he was working with color gels. It was very healing. I hoped it would be Healing for him as well. I think it was, actually.”

—Bette Stoler

“I think [if he had lived] there would have been a period in his life where he would have gone just into healing.”

—Robert Bethea

In the quiet dimness of the La MaMa Annex that late-summer afternoon, eulogies—spoken or silent—sent phrases swirling overhead, gaining momentum. Words became wings that took flight. An upward rush of air. The twinkling of a thousand distant lights. Ganymede was secure among the stars.

P.S. I’M NOT IN CHICAGO

About the time Robbie Anton was returning to New York from Vermont to pick up the threads, John Jesurun was embarking on a seminal project that would lead eventually to his promotion to the front ranks of theater artists of the 1980s. (They were separated in age by only two years, but Anton, because of his earlier start and subsequent demise, would remain identified with the performance movement of the 1970s.) The project happened in a serendipitous manner in an unlikely place. Jesurun frequented a popular night club/bar in the East Village called the Pyramid Club on Avenue A between Sixth and Seventh Streets. He was attracted to it initially because, “it was someplace to go. It has rock-and-roll and fun old things.” It was also a casual showcase for off-beat new performers, especially drag artists like Ethyl Eichelberger and John Kelly, and new-wave musicians, who were shunned by such standard performance centers as The Kitchen and Artists Space. Decorated in what might be described as 1930’s-Retro, it had a long narrow bar area that opened onto a cave-like back room with a raised bank along one side crammed with small café tables and chairs. At the center rear was a small elevated stage six feet deep, fifteen feet wide, and a yard high, where combos played for dancing every night but Monday. That night was reserved for the specialty acts that would soon make its reputation and attract some of its wildest audiences.

Jesurun was invited to show the short experimental Super-8 films he had been “playing around with” since his days as a graduate student at Yale, where he received an MFA in 1974. Some were only ten to twenty minutes long, like “*Where Are My Legs*” (1977), “*Chang In a Void Moon*” (1978), and “*Last Days of Pompeii*” (1980). But they showed promise—however fleeting. His wish was to make a new film that he could show at the Pyramid—or anywhere!—but he was hampered by the fact that he had no funds or means to produce it. So he came up with the clever idea of making a movie without film; in other words, writing a scenario that could be acted out live by a cast of actors, but as if it were being filmed, so there could be cutbacks, cut forwards, leaps in time and location, and even gender-bending switches in cast to accommodate whoever was available to perform in it at any given moment.

He talked it over with the management, and they suggested it be run as a once-weekly soap opera, each segment lasting thirty to forty-five minutes. John leaped at the chance to work in a free space and be given the freedom to create whatever he wanted. He gathered a rag-tag, but dedicated group of performers to join him (including John Kelly), and he promised the club owners they would come up with something every week for a year. It was an impossible arrangement, but he was young and eager, as was his cast, and managed to turn out thirty-six consecutive episodes, with an additional six or eight reruns, beginning in June 1982. (There were finally forty-five episodes—numbers thirty-seven to forty at the Pyramid in 1984; numbers forty to forty-two at Limbo Theatre in 1985; forty-three to forty-five at The Performing Garage and The Kitchen, 1988.)

The long-running series was called “*Chang-in-a-Void Moon*” (A Living Film Serial), and it won for Jesurun a Bessie Award in 1985. But it was almost impossible to describe or make sense out of, and that was part of its charm. In format, Jesurun would walk on stage first, to the accompaniment of lush Latin rhythms, say, or schmaltzy violin music, welcome the audience and briefly bring the storyline (what there was of it) up to date from the last episodes. There were givens: Antonio and Svetlana were married and had a son Picalbo: a Doctor Sabartes was the boy’s physician at a psychiatric institution where he’d been committed by his parents so he couldn’t go to college; Chang was an oriental man played by a very fat white woman, who, in one instance, drugged Sabartes with truth serum to free Picalbo; a Countess Isabella was Svetlana’s mother, and Chang’s wife, but not for long—he tried killing her off too many times and she divorced him; the Infant (played by a child’s empty chair) was a waif the Countess heard singing on the streets of a South American City and adopted—her age varied from seven to forty, depending on the episode and the plot.

Pure, adulterated soap opera was how the early episodes were described: ongoing, neverending sequences based loosely on the core family’s usually futile attempts to disentangle itself from the evil clutches of Chang and his buddies, who were eternally cooking up schemes to defraud it of its fortune. The family consisted of a narcoleptic, a morphine addict, and amnesiac, to name just a few; Chang’s gang included such unsavory characters as Almondine, a recording engineer, and her gross friend, a demolition expert, and so on.

Jesurun had never worked in theater before, so knew nothing about the limits of conventional staging, which was all in his favor: everything had to spring from his imagination, and so, to him, everything was possible. Surprisingly enough, using only rudimentary props and lighting, he really *did* create a “living film” at the Pyramid. Visual effects like jump cuts—where simultaneous scenes were cut off or begun in mid-sentence so that attention could be shifted back and forth between them at various places on stage with cinematic swiftness—were incorporated, along with odd camera angles, like seeming to look down on a table from above by floating it on end so the top faced the audience in black space and “seating” the actors around it by placing them on contrived platforms painted like the background (the ones on either side and bottom were actually lying on their sides and backs respectively, and the ones at the “head” suspended face-down in a harness-like contraption.)

Depending on the story line, Jesurun invented all kinds of ingenious effects: for a sailboat race, for example, he had the players hold sheets aloft that were buffeted by an offstage window fan, and they shouted above recorded sounds of waves and wind under a starry night sky cast on the back wall by a slide projector; the fan

was used again to move the propeller of a gigantic helicopter (this was many years before technical stage wizardry was developed enough to be able to replicate the breathtaking sensation of the real thing in a Broadway show like MISS SAIGON) suspended from the ceiling for a simulated rescue at sea—the actors were pulled up through a trap door on the stage, which then became the floor of the aircraft; an actor was made to look like he was jumping off a diving board into a pool by projecting a film clip of an actual setting on the wall behind where he “dove” gracefully into an (unseen) foam mattress.

Pan shots were created by having characters move about in unison during a scene, aping the movie camera’s ability to capture the action from all perspectives. Eventually video and film tapes were introduced to augment live performances; that came about originally when an actress simply couldn’t learn her lines or proper blocking fast enough to keep up with the production schedule. To save time (and face) Jesurun prerecorded her part on tape as she read from a monitor, capturing only her frontal head and shoulders; a TV monitor was installed onstage at about her eye-level and the actress stood beside it, back-to to the audience while her electronic image interacted with the live actors. Her physical presence along with the lifesize moving head on the screen was uncannily “real” and the audience soon got so used to it that it was accepted as another cast member quite naturally. The gimmick had worked so well that Jesurun began experimenting with multiple monitor images on stage at one time, sometimes having them interact only with each other with no actual performers around. This was especially useful when actors playing continuing roles missed performances or rehearsals, or simply weren’t up to the rigors of Live acting—they received only ten dollars a week for all their efforts, so commitment was not exactly total, and sometimes they’d show up stoned or dead on their feet from all-night discoing. When they were at their best, however, the troupe, which numbered twelve at times—not all of them regulars—could be remarkably versatile; at moments some of them could switch from English to French, then German, and back again without missing a beat. (Their reason for doing so will be revealed later.) Acting styles—if that’s what they could be called—varied wildly, but somehow under Jesurun’s direction they either meshed seamlessly or clashed hilariously as he intended.

John was thirty-two when he began the CHANG series: an intense, elfin type not unlike Robbie Anton. Slight of build, soft-spoken, with hooded dark brown eyes and glossy straight black hair that fell to his collar—a side hank of which was usually parked behind one ear, he was diminutive in size but not in directorial capabilities. He handled his sometimes flaky brood with unruffled charm laced with no-nonsense firmness. He had to. In order to cope with a weekly schedule of shows he promised the management, some kind of regimen had to be imposed. It began Tuesday night, late, when “I’d get my coffee and cigarettes and everything, then sit down and write a script all the way into Wednesday morning. Everything had to be finished and xeroxed and ready to go by Wednesday night when we’d have our first rehearsal...where I lived on Perry Street in a minuscule apartment shared with a stand-up comedian. Then we rehearsed again, same place, usually on Friday night.... The third rehearsal was on Sunday morning at the Club when I would block out everything and everybody memorized it. Then appear on Monday night. Very fast; very decisive; it was great! There was this feeling of hysteria—creative hysteria, for everybody.”

The actors were coached to deliver their lines in generally deadpan tones with very little inflection, like sleepwalkers, making the already ridiculous plots—bombings, hallucinations, plane crashes, disappearances, betrayals, poisonings, etc.—even more preposterous.

Within a year after the first antic episode, CHANG had developed a cult following, with John Jesurun its acknowledged high priest. *The Village Voice* began writing about it, and high-class periodicals devoted precious pages to the new ‘Cinematic Theatre’. Almost without being aware of it, Jesurun was propelled into a theatrical career he never originally intended or even anticipated. From his earliest recollections, he’d only wanted to be a painter.

He was an army brat, born in 1951, the third of four children of a father from Curacao and a Puerto Rican mother. The family lived all over the United States, moving every couple years, and spent four years stationed

in Germany. His father, a doctor, was raised a Roman Catholic, as was John, but their unusual last name—Jesurun—had old Sephardic roots. (The proof of its uniqueness in America was evident by a quick scan of a 1990 New York City telephone directory, showing John to be the only Jesurun listed, sandwiched between Jesup & Lamont, Inc., and Jesus Cruz Grocery.) Finding it was an illustrious name mentioned in the Bible, he traced his family back to 1492 and discovered that “Jesurun” was an honorary title awarded to a family for some distinction or other: in his case his ancestors apparently saved a number of Jews from the wrath of the dreaded Inquisition and took the title as a surname, as, he learned, a number of others had done throughout Europe, with a heavy concentration of Jesuruns currently in and around Amsterdam, Holland. (The Dutch artist Maurits Escher [1898-1971] mentioned in his writings another artist named Jesurun who had been his mentor and had died in a concentration camp in World War II.)

In a discussion we had once about not being able to establish firm roots in one place in childhood and how it affected the adult, he said, “I don’t really feel like I’m from anywhere, except, maybe now, from New York.” And as for being always the one stranger in schools, etc., he added, “You learn how to walk into a room and realize you’re the outsider from an early age. You learn what to do and what not to do, how to protect yourself. That attitude [remains]—I still feel in a lot of ways like an outsider in many places, [especially] in theatrical instances, you know, with theater or film people. I never feel totally...*inside*. Which, on the other hand, is the kind of feeling I like, because I never liked being too much a part of it.” Pointing to the fact that my name and face were known in the theater, but little else about me, he thought that was the way he’d want it to be also: “They know who you are. They see you and whisper to each other. They point you out. You’re very mysterious, and mystery is a big part of all this. Isn’t that a great feeling?”

Jesurun remembered always drawing as a small child. But about the age of eleven or twelve he went headlong into painting. “I painted day and night. That’s all I lived for.”

Part of the reason it continued through adolescence was that from age eleven through sixteen his family lived in Europe, and he was exposed to all the things he had dreamed and read about—famous museums, and castles, and thousands of years of history. Art, he said, “becomes your friend. It helped me a lot [in all the] moving around; I always had the painting to go to—to be able to say to myself, ‘Well, I can *paint*’, you know?”

His parents were also very encouraging. Being in the sciences (his grandmother and older brother, as well as his father, were doctors), they found his interest in art strange and somewhat... shocking, so therefore intriguing. “They still are shocked. They keep asking [in wonderment about each new show], ‘How do you think of all these things?’” And so they indulged him with pride, taking him anywhere he showed any interest in going. Later the entire family, including his younger sister and brother, grew to appreciate his artistry, and attended his productions, even though none of them were really “into that”.

He entered the Philadelphia College of Art in 1968 to study painting. During the first year he had to attend a three-dimensional design class (as all of us who studied at Pratt Institute did). At first he had a terrible time making things look right from every angle, all around. But as he struggled he became more engrossed in the possibilities, and, before he knew it, he was hooked on sculpture the way he had been on painting earlier. Instead of carving shapes from solids, or creating them by adding substances to other substances, however, he liked best seeing how materials looked and acted in relationship to others in space: “That element that people keep telling you isn’t really there, but we all know it is.” He was not very good at drawings (“that was why I went into painting [originally], because it was much more fun to paint it on than to draw it on...”), but when his teachers looked at them they usually remarked about their “architectural” quality, not because of tight, exact rendering, but because they seemed to relate successfully to the spaces around them and how he perceived them.

Jesurun received his BFA in 1974, and enrolled as a graduate student at Yale. “It was great,” he remembered.” Basically, you got a studio and they left you alone and you did whatever you wanted. The teacher or professor

would come by and look at your work and we'd talk about it, and you'd maybe have a critique sometimes. It was very private and very good, I thought, because it left you to your own devices..in a more professional sense." He began creating sculptures that moved, and soon learned that they revealed themselves in motion best when they were caught on film, so that every nuance and special juxtaposition could be savored sequentially.

True to form, filming became his next great fixation. He bought a better camera and started shooting everything around him—"birds, trees, anything..."—in Super 8. That led to playing around with editing and producing visual conglomerations of "ideas and feelings," which led to wanting to introduce live, moving persons in them: "Sculpting them in space, actually. Which goes back to not being a good draftsman. I'd always thought, 'Wouldn't it be really great to be able to draw the human figure well?' Figurativism was not in then. So putting people on film, or working with them, was a way [for me] to get back to the human figure."

He got his MFA from Yale in 1974 and moved immediately to New York, where, after the usual "interim" forms of livelihood like waitering and janitoring, he took a job at CBS, simply because a friend who worked there told him of an opening and because he was broke. It consisted of monitoring television programs five days a week, four hours a day ("believe me, that was more than enough...."). What started out as a thankless bore became an interesting occupation in time. The monitoring was done by the social research department of CBS, made up entirely of social scientists who were trying to find out what went on in television and also in the heads of the people watching it. The main project was called the Violence Study. Jesurun and his fellow workers watched every show that was transmitted, noting every form of violence that occurred, no matter how fleeting or inconsequential; for example, if any were killed, what sex and age were they, and who did it—again, what sex and age? As an adjunct, they also studied interrelationships: if it was a family show, who really ran the family—mother, father, child? And what was at work there? Also, what kind of language was used: bad, insulting, discriminatory, double entendres.

For three years John Jesurun investigated thousands of "trashy, trashy shows. But I really learned a lot about the country, by watching. —This', I said, 'is what everybody is consuming here.— The experience left lasting images—and nightmare visions—in his mind, and his long preoccupation with violence would affect his later work. Near the end of the last year, when he was tiring of it, he wrote a "funny" letter to the Dick Cavett Show, a weekly high-brow interview program whose subjects and host he admired, asking for employment. The producer called him in for an interview, and then hired someone else. But after a few weeks, another shift took place in the office, and they called him in again, this time giving him the grand-sounding title of "Associate Producer." It was the chance of a lifetime.

"That's where I really learned the power of the word. It was a whole education to me. He had writers, he had artists, and they would all sit and talk for a half hour. That's all they would do—nothing else. The office was filled with books. People would send them in, piles of them, from all over [to hopefully be reviewed]. And so you'd go through them all trying to find interesting people to have on the show. Then these great people [appeared] and you could watch shows being taped every day. And I learned—they're talking! They're really saying something! Isn't that at least as interesting as being visual?"

Dick Cavett, himself a diminutive bundle of inquisitive energy, was a fitting mentor for a burgeoning writer intent on learning about the power of narrative. Not an especially original thinker, Cavett did have a keen intellectual curiosity about those who were, however, as well as an abiding respect for practitioners of the written word. Both his parents were teachers in Gibbon, Nebraska, where he was born in 1936. He entered Yale in 1954 and majored in drama, figuring it was a shorter leap to Broadway from New Haven than from the cornhusker state. But his small stature and flat nasal voice limited his possibilities after graduation. He worked as a copy boy at *Time* magazine for a while, then became "talent coordinator" of Jack Paar's "Tonight Show" on television, meanwhile developing his own standup comedy act that he toured with in 1965. Appearances on the Ed Sullivan and Merv Griffin's shows and "What's My Line?" gave him national exposure

and it wasn't long before he had his own slot on ABC (later switching to PBS), interviewing all kinds of celebrities, but favoring authors with new books to discuss. The book-strewn office of his company, Daphne Productions, was where John Jesurun and other staff members pored over the "tons of literary potential".

Jesurun remained with Cavett for three years, dotting on every "word." Meanwhile, he continued writing, directing, designing, shooting, and editing short narrative films on his own, and in the process developing (almost unconsciously) his radical structural and stylistic vocabulary. By the time *CHANG IN A VOID MOON* began to be serialized, and he realized that, for him, words were "really going to be *it*" (frankly, at the Pyramid, he didn't have much else; there were no lights, little space, makeshift props, and who knew if the actors were any good?), he decided that if he could work as hard as he did for Cavett, he could surely work as hard for himself. And so he became what he never expected to be—a theater auteur with the sensibilities of a filmmaker, instead of vice versa.

"Back then, I knew in my head I was making films, because my idea was to make a film without filming it. I had no interest—no idea—about what theater or anything would be. I knew a little bit about performance art from being in the art world. But in my head, I kept thinking, 'I'm making a film. I'm making a film. It just happens to be live.' When people would say, 'Don't you know this is called theater, or performance?' I, wanting to be the outsider, would answer, 'If you call it theater, then I'll call it film.' [Finally] I admitted it's something in between..."

In October 1983, Jesurun toured *CHANG IN A VOID MOON*, now described as "a living film serial", in Europe, centering in Berlin, Munich and Zurich. He took with him seven of the original cast members, and performed six episodes in repertory. As mentioned in the last chapter, he was faithful (as were John Kelly and Anton) about writing me periodically, telling about his journeys and projects. Since *CHANG* was his first traveling show, as well as the first trip abroad for many of the troupe, there was plenty to relate, most of it frustrating. Like the night they were going by train from Berlin to Munich. There were so many empty compartments that the performers spread out among the cars, taking their choice. Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, the train was switched (they were in what was still East Germany) and some of the cars left behind. Someone woke quickly and had presence enough to run through the corridors, arousing the others, one of whom just barely made it by jumping from one car to another after it had already been uncoupled and was moving away. They were all terribly frightened, because, being in Communist territory, they had no idea what could have happened to them if they were stranded there. As it was, there was more trepidation when they arrived in Munich to find another of their number missing. They searched the entire train, and finally found him in one of the darkened back cars, still asleep. But for awhile, as John wrote, "It was so scary."

His letter continued, "But also I must say that the tour [in Germany] was one of our most difficult times. We were doing three different episodes of *CHANG* on three different nights in a row. The only time we could rehearse was in the middle of the night after this club [Café Einstein, Berlin] had closed. So we had to rehearse the next episode all night, and then sleep all day, then come in and perform it. And then start the next rehearsal again after they closed. That was very difficult. [We] all were up all the time."

On the subject of his letter writing, John's penchant for denuding every hotel room he ever stayed in of its supply of stationery, and hoarding it to use for all his correspondence needs back in New York, prompted the rather cryptic heading for this section of the chapter. He seemed to be trying to push his early claim of not being from anywhere by penning notes on, say, letterheads from Madrid, which he would then mail in London, with return addresses in New York. Without checking the post marks, it was difficult to know where he was at any given moment; one time I received a letter from him under a Paris hotel logo without doing so, and was amazed to run into him the same afternoon on Sixth Avenue in front of the A&P. He laughed at my confusion, and said he had decided he should use up some of his older stock before it mildewed. It turned out he hadn't been in Paris for a couple years. I told him that in the next letter he sent me, I hoped he would have mercy on my addled brain and give some indication of his whereabouts. So, not long afterwards, a letter

arrived with the name of Chicago's Bismark Hotel emblazoned across the top. At the bottom he'd added, "P.S I'm not in Chicago." Since he had included a New York phone number to call if I wanted more information about the project described, I assumed it was sent, then, from the City, but fished the envelope out of the waste basket anyway, only to find it postmarked "San Francisco."

Back in New York in November, his next piece, BIRD'S EYE VIEW, went into rehearsal and was performed at Danspace Project at St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery. In it Jesurun lifted a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's film "*The Birds*" as his starting point—the one showing a group of people at a restaurant bar, talking about the birds attacking the schoolchildren (just before the gas station explosion). As the conversation moved from one character to another, so did the bar, which was a plank held up at either end by actors. It circled around as in a pan shot, with everyone moving with it, but seemingly still in place. The dialogue, playfully rearranged by Jesurun, was done almost straight, as if everything said made coherent sense. But, in fact, he had the actors—most of them from CHANG—sometimes repeat a scene two or three times. Then he would cut them off in mid-sentence with blackouts, or have them switch roles (gender disregarded), or speak at times in a foreign language. (He explained years later that he used that language-swap device to make the audience's ears prick up and listen for the words they *could* understand. He also noted that, when one walked about New York, different foreign dialogues were encountered all the time and accepted as part of the street patois of the city, and he wanted to incorporate that into the rhythm of his lines.) In BIRD'S EYE VIEW the effect of all his tinkering resulted in Hitchcock's thriller being as much about collective sexual tensions and confusion as about hysteria. And it was hysterical.

Jesurun and Ellen Stewart first met when someone took her to a Monday night show at the Pyramid. He had gone to La MaMa a few times before that, but, not being terribly interested in theater then, remembered little about it. She plunked down on a pillow on the floor like everyone else (the performing area had been expanded by then out six or seven feet from the stage). She liked what she saw, and invited him to do something for her theater. He recalled his reaction: "I thought, oh my God! I mean, they're giving me my own space. I don't have to share it with someone else—disco dancers and such. So that was like...Dreamland. And lights! A box-office!...she encouraged me to do just whatever I wanted. She said, 'Honey, you're here to do whatever you want. I'm not coming to rehearsals. Don't worry about it.' So that's how I learned a lot again, in another way; about how you put things together."

He had none of Anton's compunctions about being one of Stewart's "dah-lins." He joined her family willingly, and never regretted it. He became one of her favorites and dedicated every show he did after that—at La MaMa or elsewhere—to her. I kidded her once, after his fourth or fifth successful year at La MaMa, saying there was symbiosis working there. She looked at me funny and replied that she didn't know from "symbo-sis", but that she was good for him and he was good for her.

In retrospect, CHANG IN A VOID MOON was a sketchbook in which Jesurun worked out many of the performing elements that would be more fully realized in later work. He liked to give interviewers catch phrases they could exploit as leads or captions and the most often cited was one he must have stayed up all one night to make sound spontaneous. But it was apt: "I write with a typewriter on one side and a sketch book on the other. So then the words and images and ideas happen simultaneously." Apparently sometimes a scene would come from a drawing and at others, from verbal situations, as was amply demonstrated in his first La MaMa presentation, DOG'S EYE VIEW, in January 1984. From the sketch book came the set that was all angles and planes in space. It consisted of five white rectangles: one downstage center, parallel to the audience at table height; one upstage center at right angles to it, and tilted down in front; two hanging vertically at the sides of the stage on diagonals; and one upright at the back that doubled as a projection screen for a backdrop that showed a starry night over a prairie.

Traveling across the prairie was a wagon train heading west. The time: 1867. The unlikely cast of characters wedged within the rectangles—which, as the mind comprehended the situation, the eye recognized as a styl-

ized wagon enclosure—including such historical figures as Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, whose husband may or may not have been assassinated, and the mad Empress Carlotta of Mexico, fleeing with her entourage from the aftermath of her husband Maximillian's execution. There was a former runaway slave on board, played by two actresses—one black, one white; a man with a camera who may or may not have been a photographer or a spy; and a somewhat deranged boy who may or may not have been his son, and who appeared to murder him—or somebody—near Great Salt Lake. But identities kept shifting, matching comparably altered visual perspectives. Actors moved behind and around the rectangles and up on hidden platforms so that the upper parts of their bodies projected over them, as if the audience was viewing the scenes from above.

True historical facts were circumvented (Mary Todd Lincoln never took such a trip, and poor Carlotta was bundled off to Belgium to an asylum), and to pile enigma on enigma, there was even a sinister couple on board the wagon whom Mrs Lincoln apparently hired to impersonate her and the president. Heart-rending accounts of both historical ladies' plights were juxtaposed against flip vaudeville-type one-liners. (When a man at the dinner table announced he'd have to bathe his eyes in salt water to wash away the memory of a particularly offensive sight, another diner non-sequitered, "Pass the salt".) The author seemed to be saying that events, in themselves, are unknowable; our understanding of them depends entirely on the point of view we're given, either by history books or "theatrical reality". In this, Jesurun most closely resembled such predecessors as Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson.

Michael Feingold, the drama critic of *The Village Voice*, gave DOG'S EYE VIEW a conditional rave review, hailing Jesurun as brilliant, with new energy and fresh vision, but thought the acting was entirely incompetent, which baffled and depressed the company. Feingold, however, closed with saying he intended to keep an eye on Jesurun's theater from then on; he did, and in time became his staunchest supporter in the press.

1984 was a prolific year for Jesurun. He produced three major pieces, all at La MaMa. It was also the first year of our involvement with funding him (which continued off and on into the 1990s). After DOG'S EYE VIEW in January, was NUMBER MINUS ONE, PART ONE, which opened in May. (Parts One and Two were presented at the Performing Garage in July, and toured Germany in June 1986.) One critic called it "(David Mamet's) GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS on pentothal." It, as well as Part II, dealt with a subject he had little respect for: meetings or conventions of international delegations. This was, from program notes, purported to be about a "carnal struggle" the members had taken time out for. But what resulted was just talk—mysterious talk, disjointed talk, talk in foreign tongues—from actors seated around a rectangular table (left over from DOG'S EYE VIEW?) that, with his trademark special effect, seemed to be viewed from above. Each line was underscored by the sounds of distant machine gun fire, much pointing of fingers—and turning of tables! Jesurun, who, like Robbie Anton, was fascinated by rock performers, and would later use some of their lyrics (especially Bob Dylan's) in his scripts, claimed that NUMBER MINUS ONE was actually about Brian Jones, a member of Rolling Stones, who drowned in 1969, even though he was neither depicted nor mentioned.

The third work of the year was RED HOUSE, performed in May, with music composed and played by Steven Antonelli. It further explored the possibilities of Jesurun's now-established stylistic methods: repetitious and fragmented dialogue, slapstick non-sequiters, the interplay of tape recorders and video monitors with on-stage action, and the cinematic effects. But this time he added color and live music.

RED HOUSE was all about rock 'n' roll, from the minimal plot about a couple of washed-up musicians who arrived at a roadside "dinette" called RED HOUSE (after one of Jimi Hendrix's tunes) and slowly took over the place, exchanging places with the bored help, to the three rock musicians stationed atop high black boxes at the sides and back of the stage throughout the piece, fencing in the players. There were verbal and musical allusions to David Bowie, the Spinners, Michael Jackson, Musical Youth, James Brown, and Chuck Berry, among others, but most notably Jimi Hendrix, the legendary guitarist who died in 1970.

Jesurun admired most Hendrix's ability to carry over the old blues traditions into a new form for the future, and his genius for revolutionizing what could be produced on an electric guitar. In RED HOUSE Jesurun

showed that comedy and tragedy were not opposite extremes, and hinted that rock-'n'-roll may have been the root of the encompassing confusion. When asked about his obsession with 1960s dead icons like Hendrix and Brian Jones, he said that they represented a “subtitle” of his ongoing interest in life versus death, and why he was also fascinated by surrealists like the painter Picasso and the Spanish writer Marquez. As with Robbie Anton, he felt close to the Doors and especially Jim Morrison, because they were larger than life now they were out of it.

It is interesting to note that Jesurun and Anton shared similar preoccupations—rock and its impact on society, surrealism, and death—but dealt with them in vastly different ways. In RED HOUSE (the stage floor was painted that color, incidentally), as in other of his works, Jesurun made invidious comparisons between “real things,” (originators like Hendrix), and the clone-like zombies that followed in the wake, and decried the public’s lack of discernment: “Just switch on the beat box,” said one character, “and they’ll never know the difference.” Jesurun felt if he could make the words important enough, they would make the visual happen: physically by implication. Anton’s approach was wordless surrealism made manifest in such a way that the final outcome—death—was always apparent.

SHATTERHAND MASSACREE-RIDERLESS HORSE, initially given four scant airings in November 1985, at St. Mark’s-in-the-Bowery, was, chronologically, John Jesurun’s next work. But, to everyone’s surprise (certainly his!), it became a durable staple in his growing repertoire, and was eventually staged all over the United States—from Boulder, Colorado to San Francisco, California; to Minneapolis, Minnesota to Hartford, Connecticut; and across Europe from Amsterdam, Netherlands to Valladolid, Spain to Montalcino, Italy and Zagreb, Yugoslavia. In May, 1990, it was presented at the Monty Theatre, Antwerp, Belgium.

It was the nearest to a “standard” play that he ever created. There was a stronger semblance of a plot (which, like all his work, could still be interpreted several ways); there were no clever cinematic angles—just a bare floor and on it a rectangular table around which the actors sat on folding chairs. The only technological gimmickry was the use of four TV monitors placed strategically around the huge dance floor area of the main church. They, and a single oblong screen high in the rafters, all showed the same stationary shot looking out an ordinary double-hung window, with the bottom half opened to a menacing-metallic sky. A gauzy curtain fell in front of it, buffeted occasionally by faint breezes. The overall impression was of being inside a remote building, maybe a farmhouse isolated on a prairie. The story seemed based on three sources; first, a family group of, perhaps, early pioneers who had settled in the West; then a reference to the myths of “wild children” as exemplified in the Francois Truffaut film *The Wild Child*, and lastly a nod to the suspense techniques of Alfred Hitchcock—humorous and appalling all at once.

SHATTERHAND opened with the return of a son who had been thrown off the farm by his father for having (supposedly, always supposedly) killed all the animals and plant life. He may or may not have been living with wolves since his exile, and he might even now be a “wolf vampire boy.” In any event, his sister welcomed him back eagerly. But his parents, especially his father, were frightened and incensed. The boy was forced into a chair, and the father tied a noose around his neck, extending the end of the rope into a taut radius that shrank ever smaller as he circled menacingly around the youth. As the family recounted its history (in usual fractured Jesurun phrases), the father narrowed the circle by shortening the rope, hand over hand, until he and the son were eyeball to eyeball. In the course of events, the positions got reversed, with the son stomping around the noosed father, as the angry incriminating dialogue continued and intensified. Then the son—wolf-boy?—threatened (or didn’t) to provoke an attack on them all by a pack of wolves (Hence the massacre?), which in a funny-and-chilling Hitchcock-like segment, might even have been “flying” wolves—or “amphibious.” One reviewer thought they might just be surreal birds—or not real creatures at all, but how Jesurun manifested visually the fearful American consciousness, done, of course in his now inimitable, acerbic, but very droll, style. He was using whatever device necessary to shock the middle class back into reexamining its mythic, legendary and animal roots.

The actors in SHATTERHAND were universally praised this time around. Michael Feingold was impressed with their growth and that of the company, now officially called Shatterhand, Inc. He pointed out especially Steve Buscemi, Valerie Charles, Sanghi Wagner, and Larry and Michael Tighe, who were able to make the work dazzle.

Steve Buscemi, as the feral son, was singled out as “brilliant.” Buscemi, who reminded me of a freaked-out Raymond Massey, with his bulging eyes and expressive neck muscles, had been working with Jesurun almost from the start, and he was now a featured performer. It was interesting to watch him mature from piece to piece, showing every indication of someday becoming a major acting talent. At the time that SHATTERHAND was in performance, he could be seen in his first movie role in Bill Sherwood’s ruefully witty “Parting Glances,” and eventually he left the company to take up a career in films (he would win the award for best supporting actor at the independent feature-film awards ceremony in Hollywood in 1993, for “Reservoir Dogs”).

Larry Tighe was a veteran of early Richard Foreman productions, who also had been with Jesurun for a long time. “He taught me a lot,” Jesurun said of him, “besides being a very good actor, he is very well read. He loves...books. So his appreciation of language really affected me, because, (for example) if I would write something and he would say, ‘This is really good’... I would take his word for it.” His son Michael began acting in Shatterhand Inc. productions when he was only eleven or twelve years old, and we watched him blossom before our very eyes also, from child to adolescent to gifted young performer. He, too, was prominently featured in all subsequent Jesurun works.

John claimed the only “training” he imposed on the troupe was the constant admonition to “deliver words faster and flatter, faster and flatter”. The confrontational, machine-gun style evolved quite naturally from reading the scripts aloud together, and remained even when the plays were translated and spoken in foreign languages. “The script is a map of declamation,” Jesurun explained, “and it just comes out that way many times. Sometimes I have to push an actor in that direction, but a lot have a very good sense of reading these things, and do it very naturally. By working on the scripts, they hear the other person. It’s very physical as well as mental. They hear Bum, Bum, Burn, and they react, Bum, Bum, Bum. Like singing—a lot of it is very musical actually, but it’s the natural kind of music people have inside them that they don’t even know they have. I love to see the actors react that way. Meredith Monk came to a piece of mine and said, ‘John, this is music. It’s words, but it’s music.’ And a lot of people say that to me.

“I always say to the actors that they’re not only one character but also they’re all pieces of the same character—someone’s an arm, someone’s a leg,—but all part of the same thing. There are really no supporting or leading roles, so, many times, one character speaks with many points of view.

“There’s none of this logical back-and-forth, no steady agreement. And it doesn’t seem to matter—it jolts you but you never really know why.”

When I asked him if there were things that the actors did, either by voice inflection or physical gesture, that influenced the “look” of a performance, he answered, “Yeah, well, there were times when they did (something) and I said we have to keep that. Or I’d see something and think, ‘I can’t use it here, but maybe I can use it someplace else.’ But generally my process is much more cut and dried, meaning placement in space and certain movements. It’s not one of those workshop things where the actors sort of do everything and you pick what you want from it, because I don’t like just jerking around. I have no interest in that...I don’t need eight hours of rehearsal to get something interesting.” Then he added, “But I love it when things go wrong when we’re rehearsing. The more chaotic the better. But generally, you’re not going to get a good accidental effect unless you have a good concept in the beginning.”

I wondered, in passing, if he and the company were bothered by adverse criticism. He nodded yes, and sighed. “Again, it’s the power of the word—reading that imprint, what they said. It can be horrendous...those words shocking you in through your eyes, and you go, ‘I can’t believe somebody wrote this for the public to

read, this hideous thing.’ And then the idea of not being understood, constantly being misinterpreted. It can be depressing. But, then, what I usually do is just throw the review away and I never look at it again. I forget about it.” About the cast being affected, “There was that first review that Feingold gave me for DOG’S EYE VIEW, in which he said, ‘This is a great new theater artist’, and then he proceeded to take his knife out and say the most horrible, horrible things. It was horrible for the actors to have to go on that night. That’s the hard part—getting a bad review and having to go on that night.”

What bothered me most about SHATTERHAND MASSACREE-RIDERLESS HORSE was its relentlessly implied violence: implied, because overt physical action was seldom manifest in Jesurun’s productions—actors almost never touched each other. Violence for violence’s sake. Jesurun addressed the subject in his own convoluted way: “I feel there is something really primal about stirring up this violence—but to notice the stirring of violence, which I find all over the world. I find it in people. And the inability to locate where it comes from, and why it’s there. Which is why I leave it in with a question mark, meaning, Why in God’s name is it there? What purpose does it serve? *Can* it serve a purpose? What effect will it have? Why do people do this to each other? It has always been a great question mark. And then there is the rising of a violent mood, and then it will subside. Which is the other side of it. Because I also feel that in my pieces there are the quiet soft moments which suddenly get destroyed by the violence. Which I feel is also a great human tragedy. Just the idea of one thing being blown away by the other, when both exist in the same person.”

I also felt, after witnessing SHATTERHAND MASSACREE-RIDERLESS HORSE, an obsessive air of pessimism becoming apparent in his work, and wondered if that was a natural development or one he intended the audience to experience. He answered, “I think basically I am very optimistic. But the way I get to my optimism is through riding the train of pessimism; because, even in my most pessimistic pieces, there’s a little light somewhere in the corner. That is important for me to see, and the audience to see. Some (writers) like to go with the pessimism totally. But bringing it up, for me, is like asking, ‘Are things really this dark?’ Yes, they really are this dark, that is the fact. But there’s something else—the light in the pessimism is also the struggle of all these pieces. And that’s an optimism to me.”

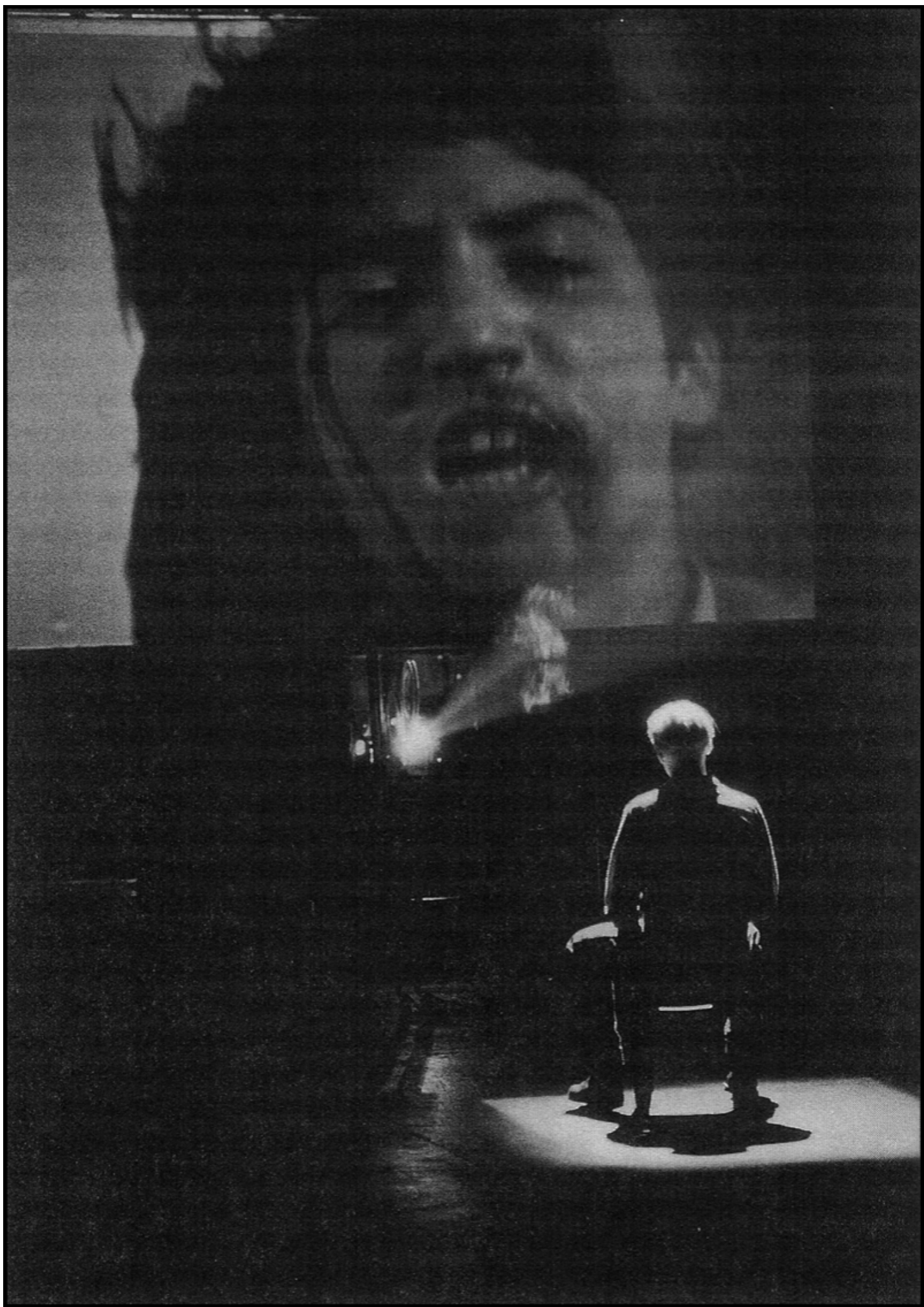
The humor that threaded through his pieces, sometimes tossed up like confetti, was what had made the heavier passages bearable for me—a brief lightening of the load—and I asked if others caught it. He replied that often they didn’t. “I’m always shocked when somebody doesn’t mention it. A lot of these pieces are entirely peppered with this humor, which is a striking out in some way. It’s very much there. I can’t look at the world without laughing sometimes,” he said in his soft, high-pitched voice, “which is why, when I’m writing a horrific line, just the opposite will then emerge. To me it shows how the mind fights with itself. But, I think more people found humor in the early work. Whereas now, they...Well, I write funnier lines now than before, but now the fact that makes it funny is where it’s played—what it’s after or before.” But the awareness that audiences weren’t “getting” his humor wasn’t going to change the writing one iota, he said. He didn’t intend to be another Neil Simon, force-feeding them obvious one-liners. “Frankly, I’m not that concerned with the audience to want to annoy them or please them.”

Jesurun seemed to be unconsciously reverting back to his cinematic roots as film became increasingly more important in his pieces. The tug-of-war that must have been going on in his mind over which was the more important to him—live or filmed action—was alluded to in his next work, DEEP SLEEP, presented at La MaMa Annex in January 1986. In it a confrontation was set up between the actors on stage and those shown on two large movie screens—one at either end of a space that resembled a tennis court—from two corresponding projectors set on pedestals on the stage, and encased, like museum pieces, in plexiglas. The larger-than-life “video heads” on the screens tried to entice the live players to “come over” into the forever land of filmdom. The wrangling about whether to stay or leave turned into heated shouting matches, with phrases hurtling back and forth like volleys at a Wimbledon final, causing no end of frenzied head swivelling from the audience seated on both long sides of the “court”

When characters on stage succumbed and “went over” to screenland, their images loomed large on the screens as soon as they exited to the wings, and they also became proselytizers. It was as if Jesurun was suggesting that, while life on earth must end, that on film would continue as long as there was a projectionist up there to “roll ‘em.” Perhaps the sleek, silently turning projectors were glassed in to evoke sinister medieval religious relics with miraculous powers. Also, he seemed to be reminding us that our earthly existence was so intermingled with the fantasy world of the projected image that we were no longer able to accept movie stars as human beings, for example. Only their perceived celluloid lives had validity. So when the onstage characters finally agreed to be transported they first had to allow the sense of self to be destroyed.

The protagonist of the piece was named Whitey (Steve Buscemi had gone so far as to bleach his naturally dark hair a hideous platinum for the role). He was ultimately the only mortal able to resist the temptation to die and go to movie heaven. His insistent verbal battle was what kept the tension cooking. Poor Sparky, child-junkie (Michael Tighe), finally lost his struggle after a valiant last effort that, we discovered when he reappeared on the screen, left him bloodied and bowed. To emphasize his helplessness, a puppet looking very much like the young Tighe was tossed about the stage from one actor to another.

In SHATTERHAND Jesurun had again mixed old rock and pop by collaging Beatle ballads with others by such as Buffy Sainte-Marie. In DEEP SLEEP he juxtaposed the banter of screwball movies of the 1930s and 1940s with snippets of recognizable tunes by Aretha Franklin and the Four Tops. He had Sparky recite a spoken version of Lou Reed’s “Heroin.” The enlarged screen faces of Black-Eyed Susan and John Hagan looked imperiously down on all that with mock sympathy. Didn’t those stupid mortals understand Federico Fellini’s great maxim about illusion being the ultimate reality? (Mention of Black-Eyed Susan brought to mind the only serious near-disaster the company ever encountered. During a rehearsal for DEEP SLEEP one of the cables holding up a table end broke loose suddenly and knocked her to the floor. But, old trooper that she was, she got right up and kept talking. At other times in DEEP SLEEP the sound in the videos would go off for a minute or two, inexplicably, leaving the horrified actors to lip-read the images as best they could.)



DEEP SLEEP (1986) By John Jesurun.
On screen: Michael Tighe.

Photo by M. Argus

At the end of the piece, Whitey could be seen dashing from one screen to the other repeatedly shouting the last words Sparkey screamed as he was “transported”: “I will last forever because I am on film, over and over, until I am shredded.”

The technical virtuosity required to keep two seventy-minute movies going at exactly the right tempos to simultaneously interact with the five on-stage performers was a daunting task that was handled with aplomb by Richard Connors, the brilliant cinema-photographer of all the videos and films for Jesurun, who Jesurun admitted was one of the most important people he ever worked with. They had got together almost by mistake. Connors overheard somebody somewhere talking about one of the Shatterhand, Inc. projects, and interrupted the conversation, saying, “Well, I’m a good cameraman. Maybe I could do that.” “He appeared like an angel out of heaven,” Jesurun recollected, “because (otherwise) I don’t know what I would have done.” (Jesurun was ably abetted through all the formative years also by the superb lighting expert, Jeff Nash, who had previously worked with Stuart Sherman, and whom John initially insisted the management of the Pyramid Club hire to assist him if they wanted the CHANG IN A VOID MOON series to continue.)

DEEP SLEEP was not one of my favorite Jesurun productions. Once the basic premise was made, I felt the remainder of the piece consisted of so many verbal clubs hitting the viewer over the head unmercifully. Also it suffered from a rather typical Jesurun weakness—letting the show run too long. I found with most of his works that they would have benefitted being shortened by twenty minutes to a half hour. But the judging panel at *The Village Voice* didn’t agree with me. It was given the 1986 Obie Award for “Best Play.” It also toured Europe in 1989, being performed in Hamburg, Germany; Amsterdam, Netherlands; and Zagreb, Yugoslavia.

Versatile linguist that he was, John Jesurun had written a German version of SHATTERHAND (it’s title, SHATTERHAND MASSACREE AS PFERD OHNE REITER) for the performances in Giessen, West Germany in July 1985. He did the same for the tour in 1989 to Frankfurt of the work that followed DEEP SLEEP chronologically, WHITE WATER, first performed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Massachusetts, which commissioned it, in October 1986. It dealt with the then very unhip subject of religion, and for it Jesurun dredged up lingering childhood remembrances of his Spanish/Puerto Rican/Catholic upbringing (“I was an altar boy, all that.”) Where DEEP SLEEP worked at weakening the characters’ sense of self, WHITE WATER attempted to destroy a boy’s religious vision.

The story was basically a simple one. A teenage boy (Michael Tighe) claimed to have seen a vision of a woman floating in a bubble of light, bearing water from a certain spring that she urged him to drink and then pray, and he would be granted the power to heal. The boy, Mack, didn’t have any parents around to help him cope with the Inquisition-like examinations that followed the revelation. (He joked they were on a second honeymoon in Tibet, and that he himself didn’t feel particularly religious.) So he simply submitted to more than nine-hundred questions put to him by the other two actors in the cast, Larry Tighe and Valerie Charles, who played multiple interrogators by appearing as “video heads” on sixteen monitors set about the stage as well as in person. Mack admitted that he was gaining a following because of the vision, and that there were some who were claiming cures by just being in his presence. As the questioning progressed it became quite clear that Mack was probably lying, which, Jesurun seemed to be saying, wasn’t as important as the relationship between effects of time-honored beliefs and today’s media manipulations. The inquisitors, including a representative of the clergy, a television executive, and a lawyer, also seemed to care less about truthfulness than about how his shenanigans might affect their own public images and status.

When WHITE WATER was taken to Europe the next month, it was presented at the same Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam where Anton and McClelland set up the puppet theater almost a decade earlier. The Mickery’s small auditorium was transformed into an abbreviated replication of the ICA space in Boston. The show got ample coverage in the local press, but the attendance was somewhat sparse. At one performance only three people showed up. John Jesurun recalled. “It was the worst time. There were three people in the show (plus the videos) and three people in the audience. I was very nervous because sometimes people get up and leave.

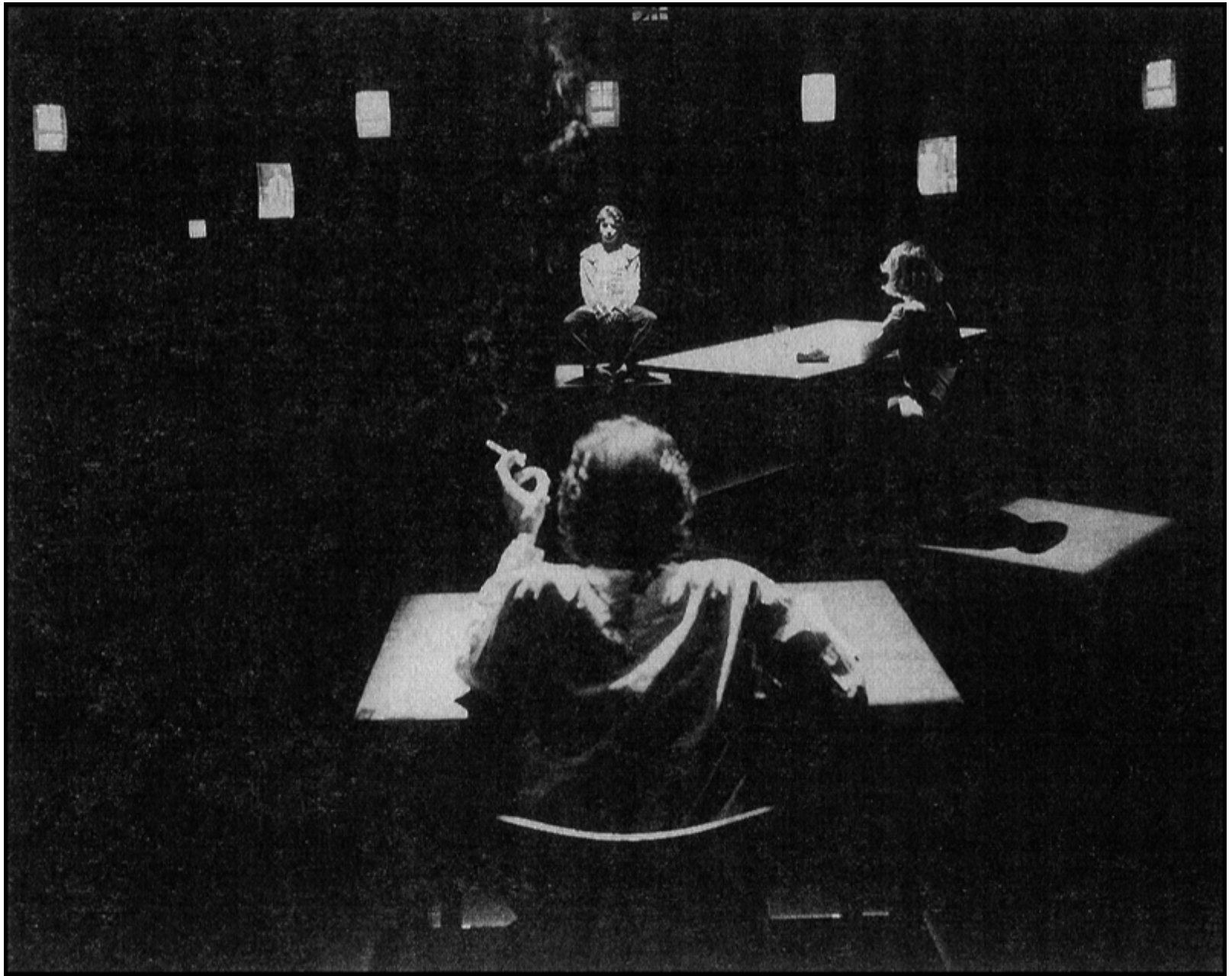
If those people get up and leave, (I thought), what will we do? But luckily they stayed, and it turned out to be a wonderful thing. The actors were also worried at first, but then sort of liked this idea of doing a very private, intimate performance.” Aside from that near-call, Shatterhand, Inc. never actually played to a totally empty house.

The foreign reviews for WHITE WATER were mostly favorable with a few reservations: the speed of the speaking was hard to keep up with, and the piece was too long. Some thought it grew tedious, but agreed that Shatterhand, Inc. was on a par with Squat Theatre and The Wooster Group. One critic, in the VOLK-SKRANT noted the visual blandness of the set and costumes: “The only outstanding color element in the performance is the actress’ red dress, which lends her a hue of the ‘apparition’...There’s color in the monitors, too, but they’re a lot more pallid.” I had often thought, myself, that there was a monotonous uniform grey-ness to all his designs, and once asked John if he consciously planned them that way, since, his being an artist originally and drawn to Picasso’s work, I would have expected his work to be filled with great chromatic brilliance. He answered, “Color is something I like to use, but only at very specific moments. I feel that I’m wasting it if I just use it (arbitrarily). For example, why waste this beautiful “red” if you can’t show it in all its “redness.” Everyone complains that all my work seems to be in black and white. But, actually what color thrills me the most is the color of human skin, which is set off by the blacks, whites, and greys, and that’s the real color I’m trying to get at, which nobody’s ever really been able to reproduce properly—the living, breathing color of skin. That’s the color I see a lot in there.” Then in an aside, “But I think my work is getting more colorized, bit by bit. I find myself seeing more in colors these days.”

Along with color, I wondered why there was so little physical action in his plays. “Again, it’s like color. I use it at only specific times. But there’s not a lot of obvious movement. And sometimes... (the players) are moving in such a natural way that no one seems to be aware of it, because their’s so much movement in the words. Words are always flying around. I think if I made the people fly around as much as the words do it would be a disaster.” Then, as with the subject of color, he added an aside, “I’m beginning to move actors more than before, I think because I’ve become more interested in dance. I just don’t like to force it. I hate this theatrical *movement* where they’re all talking and moving and (so choreographed). It annoys me.”

Always testing his artistic boundaries, he chose for his next piece to eliminate live performers entirely. (He claimed later it was to learn how much they were missed. But at the time he told me he was getting weary of actors’ schedulings, of tending to all their fragile ego problems, and simply wished to concentrate on the work alone.) BLACK MARIA was “installed” in the La MaMa Annex in April 1987. The word “installed” was an apt one, for the entire staging consisted of five enormous movie screens, four on the walls and one on the ceiling. The center space was filled with seats facing in all directions. There was no “stage.” After testily trying out places that seemed to offer the best vantage points until the lights dimmed, the audience hunkered down and was totally overwhelmed by the sight of enormous “video heads” interacting with each other from screen to screen, high above them. They had to wriggle into contortions and crane their necks to catch it all. I remember getting up and moving at least five times during the evening, then giving up with the realization that I couldn’t possibly see everything going on, and concentrating on what was nearest at hand. It was a stunning tour-de-force that must have kept Richard Connors and his assistant Curt Rosen up all night for many weeks. Just the timing alone for each of the screen figures to interact with one another was incredible. And some characters walked “out” of one screen and showed up on another as if they’d walked through the black space of the darkened theater. As usual, the plot line was enigmatic and not as important as what was done to it.

BLACK MARIA, first of all, alluded to both the old-time police vans that carted off criminals and the name of Thomas Edison’s studio. From there, it was up to the viewer to fathom the goings-on. The screens were filled with strong images of both actors and landscapes, and the story seemed to center around an isolated house on a prairie, an escaped convict, and a stray (or maybe dead) horse. The highlight was when people sat



WHITE WATER (1986) By John Jesurun

Photo by M. Agus

around a table, but they were shown on the screens as if the table was in the middle of the audience where we sat looking up and feeling small, like salt and pepper shakers next to the ketchup. The dialogue bounded across from screen to screen over our rubbernecking heads, and the effect was, quite honestly, dizzying and somewhat nauseating. I'd always had trouble looking at films very close up, but because here there was no place to move back to, I resorted to frequent stares at the floor to revive my equilibrium.

Admitting that he missed the give and take of live actors, not to mention the suspense of what might happen from performance to performance, Jesurun abandoned further exploration in the multi-screen field for the time being, and returned to "multi-disciplinary" ones. SUNSPOT was presented at the Kitchen in March 1989.

The only props on stage in SUNSPOT were four oblong tables, attached to pulleys that, in the course of the evening, raised and lowered and tilted them. Eight players, some in lab technician coats, were assembled at the beginning of the piece around one of the tables, on which they had "trapped" a sunspot, that may or may not have been a melted down Sputnik that had crashed into the sea. The sunspot, the scientists claimed, might be carnivorous or even capable of inhabiting humans or inanimate objects. On the other hand, it may have been the ghost of a young lab interpreter, Freddy Mayfield, who may have been murdered by one of the technicians, or a downed pilot who crashed in a nearby peat bog, or...

Round and round the verbiage went in usual Jesurun elliptic style, but where it stopped, nobody but he seemed to know. The piece left critics and audience equally baffled. Some asked if the sunspot was a meta-

phor for AIDS. Jesurun was no help this time in enlightening any of them. In true Pinteresque manner, he told one interviewer, “It’s sort of one confusion set upon another confusion, set upon another confusion, which keeps multiplying the confusion... In a way it’s sort of a layering of ideas that are coming from different directions—scientific ideas, medical ideas, language ideas.’ Possibly this was the piece that directly related to the fact that his family included doctors, and he wanted to display his knowledge of medical and scientific literature. But, for many of its viewers, it was pure sci-fi without the sigh or the *fie*. There was even a *femme fatale* character—maybe the pilot’s woman—who was introduced as Czech, but spoke mostly in German; in true spy-novel fashion, it was learned that Freddy’s painstaking translations of what was being discovered in the lab proved to be useless, because she had taught him “all the wrong words.” No one was very surprised to find at the end that after the surrounding tables were hoisted to the ceiling, the central one, when tipped over, contained Poor Freddy’s corpse. The German/Czech lady walked toward it, voicing the final line, “It’s so nice to see you, Mr. Mayfield”—in perfect English.

So many reviewers had emphasized the surreal aspects of his work lately, that John was getting testy about it, and one day blurted out his reaction to me:

“I love a lot of surrealism, and I see a lot of aspects of it in my work. But I see them in a different way, meaning that, maybe, someone could say, ‘Well, he’s whipped up this surrealistic vision here.’ But a lot of what people now call surrealism—to me it’s not surrealism in that sense. It’s a surrealism perhaps facing the world as it is. Most Americans don’t realize that the world is [already] surrealistic in reality. That’s what is affecting me when I write. It’s the seeming *unrealness* of the world, and yet that is what’s real, which is maybe at the basis of all surrealism. But I think a lot of Americans get swept up in this surrealistic vision-making. I am more affected by the way the world is so almost impossible to understand. And that’s what makes me think the way I do.”

It reminded me of a remark that the playwright Eric Overmyer (*ON THE VERGE*) made on the subject: “I have always been fascinated with how rich and surreal American culture is in its day-to-day reality. To take it apart and look at it is, I think, a way to cope with it, the insane aspects of it as well. In the old days, we used to get stoned and go to the Safeway and look at all the products. With that kind of perception it was amazing, it seemed intensely amusing. This place was full of all this weird shit! You could spend hours there until it wore off. American culture is a little like that—a supermarket full of bizarre stuff.”

Jesurun would claim that was the problem: “I just think this whole idea of surrealism is so misguided. I was just in Spain, and those people really get what surrealism is. They came to my work and they said, ‘This is wonderful. You’ve got it. You’re home!’ Here [in the U.S.] people think of surrealism as a product. Instead, it’s a way of life—of looking at things. It’s the *WORLD!*”

As he expounded, a vast empty plain—a barren distance—opened up in my mind, which then receded to form a background for a few limpid Dali nudes languishing about a fractured white deChirico column that cast black shadows into the foreground. Above it all was an intense cerulean sky dotted at precise intervals with Magritte clouds shaped like little men in bowler hats. Gushing through and around everything came an onslaught of word-winds by John Jesurun; whirling, swirling word-winds that lured me away into another realm of awareness—*his* world. Robbie Anton had introduced us to a dark nether place between here and the galaxies; John Jesurun to one where, in the beginning—and the end—was the *WORD* (and never so vividly as in *EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE*, the work he produced in 1990, described in Chapter One). Along with John Kelly’s exotic emirate in the following segment, they proved that in surrealism (the movement in the arts most concerned with ways of expressing the subconscious) there continued being as many new territories to explore as there were prodigious talents to find them.

(D)RAGS TO (B)RI(T)CHES

Come spring—weather permitting—outdoor flea-marketing was part of the weekend way of life for many of us Manhattanites. As indicative of the season as plazas sprouting tulips and daffodils, open-air parking lots all over town began to blossom with the accumulated flora and fauna, flotsam and jetsam of small-time second hand dealers, carefully arranged on rows of folding tables over the oil drippings of the regular week-day occupants. The message they all sent up was: save EVERYTHING! One person's trash was another's treasure. Items ranged from bona fide rare antiques to kitch collectibles, with a heavy preponderance of old costume jewelry, china, furniture and vintage apparel that could only be described charitably as shabby chic. The biggest—and best—of the “fleas” was the one that had long been a fixture at Sixth Avenue and Twenty-sixth Street. It was so popular, in fact, that it spilled over into an adjoining lot and went into year-round operation (Saturdays and Sundays), surprisingly seldom closed due to weather, and then more from threats of fierce gale winds than any of the other expected winter elements. It had a devoted following that included the known as well as those in the know. Ted Muehling, the acclaimed Coty Award winning jewelry designer (and brother of my friend Carol) hit the stalls almost as soon as they were set up in the early a.m., foraging for unique pieces to add to his extensive collection of early Victorian jewelry, as did other well-known professionals for their specialties. Broadway stars, in jeans and still sleepy-eyed, braved the unaccustomed morning air to inch their way past the tables, browsing for little nothings that struck their fancies, alongside young couples (of opposite and same genders) scavenging bargain necessities to furnish their first, wholly unaffordable New York apartments.

The Big Flea marked the southern border of the city's wholesale flower market that extended up both sides of the Avenue for five or six blocks. Every day hundreds of pots of bushes and trees were hauled out to line the edges of the sidewalks, leaving singlefile paths between that spirited pedestrians through fantasy jungles of giant rubber plants with leaves thick as tongues, densely foliated ficus trees with braided trunks, spreading palms that tickled the nose, and menacing marcenaras whose spikes looked like they could do serious damage if provoked. I was carefully picking my way through the underbrush one day on my way to an appointed visit with John Kelly, who lived nearby. It was a weekday, so I passed the lots where the flea market was spread out on Saturday and Sunday without a second glance at the boring rows of dingy suburban vehicles with old prom bows or baby shoes dangling from their mirrors. The flower market, however, was ablaze. Inside shops, oversized vats held the fragile cut blooms that arrived from Amsterdam, South America, California and Florida about 4:00 A.M. daily, and disappeared into the hands of regional retailers by 2:00 P.M. closing time. The breathtaking expanses of color and variety swept me back several years to the misty spring morn I strolled the gardens of *Giverny*, the Impressionist painter Claude Monet's home in France. Under a metallic sky, the different hues pulsed their own inner radiance, much as they did in his paintings, lending an unworldly quality to the setting. The damp specimens in the store fronts on Sixth Avenue did likewise in their grey surroundings, momentarily overwhelming the rude street life with transcendent beauty.

A block north of the Big Flea, and several buildings in from the Avenue, was the doorway that led to John Kelly's loft. The approach, past a sneaker outlet, an XXX-rated porn video parlor, a sewing machine distributor under a flag and banner maker, and the Chung Yung Chinese Restaurant (whose three-story dragon sign sent lightning flashes alongside his plate glass window) made it quite evident that this was not a neighborhood that featured marble and glass lobbies with snooty doormen and signs requiring all visitors be announced. The door was actually quite forgettably humble, unless you were a devotee of rusted historic artifacts, and might easily have been overlooked if it hadn't been that a hand-printed sign by one of the adjacent doorbells caught my eye with the legend “KELLY #2—PRESS BUZZER HARD,” indicating that none but the strong need apply.

My finger was strong enough, evidently, for the buzzer sounded, and as the door opened, I noticed the word CREATIVE—the beginning of an otherwise time-obiterated sign—across the top to it, probably tacked up

by an earlier tenant with pretensions. It was a fitting description of the current occupant, however, who could be seen on the second floor landing above the licensed electrical contractor's headquarters. He kept a knuckle pressed on his buzzer until I was well up the stairs. "You never know with that door," he called, "it can slam shut on you with the least little wind from the top floor."

As I climbed closer, I thought John Kelly looked very much as he did when I last saw him, over a year ago: still good-looking, but perhaps a tad thinner, with cheekbones more prominent and the hollows beneath them darker. He still had a shy, almost embarrassed way of dipping his chin and regarding the visitor with a soulful gaze beneath his flaring eyebrows. Like so many entertainers who became unleashed extroverts under spotlights, he was still basically shy and uncomfortable with one-on-one encounters off-stage, at least initially, even with acquaintances like me who had known him for a decade.

He made an ushering gesture into the long, low-ceilinged cavern he introduced as his "illegal illegal sublet" (doubly illegal, it turned out, because it was (1), zoned for commercial use only—no habitation—and (2), it was an illegal sublet because the person he rented it from had a no-sublet lease). On first glance it might have been a stand-in for Miss Havisham's attic, sans cobwebs, with random furnishings that looked like the results of heavy bargaining back at the Big Flea over an extended period of time. But it was soon clear that the clutter was very much under control. Directly opposite the entry, midway into the loft, two five-foot long theatrical trunks with well-traveled corners lay open on their backs, clam-like, spewing a frothy mangle of tulle, satin and lace that rivaled the flower tubs on the Avenue in color and intensity. A few items had already been extricated and draped over the sides, and it was obvious that what the trunks held was a wardrobe of fancy evening gowns, some looking suspiciously like kissing cousins of those battling weekend breezes on the racks down in the parking lot.

"I've been on the road, as you can see," he explained, indicating the mess. "And about to go out again. This is the part I hate—examining the stuff for rips and rot, and the cleaning and pressing. You wouldn't believe the wear and tear..."

We moved toward the back of the loft, skirting a big beige iron bathtub that looked as if it had been free-standing there on its claw-and-ball feet for a century, defiantly leveling "J'accuse!" at the new-fangled ripoffs calling themselves Jacuzzis. Props and costume parts were everywhere, some stacked on the floor, others stuck to the walls or hung from the ceiling (which, I noted, still boasted its original stamped-tin sheathing, Victorian garlands rampant). A wig on a nearby stand reminded me of my first introduction to John Kelly. It was at a Christmas benefit at and for P.S. 122, the pee-stained ex-public school on Second Avenue at Ninth Street that Mark Russell (no relation to me or, as far as I know, the TV political comedian) saved from the wrecker's clutches and transformed into a mecca for performance art. No lover of opening nights or benefits, it took a lot of persuading to get me to attend. But Mark succeeded by assuring me that if I stuck it out long enough to catch the last act before intermission, I'd be guaranteed an experience that would knock my socks off. "Kelly's choices are so right. He'll blow you away!"

The preliminary skits were, if anything, more innocuous and self-indulgent than those I saw the last time I visited. The seats were rockhard, the crowd boisterous with holiday cheer, and I felt a headache coming on from the overheated room. Finally the lights dimmed to signal the awaited performance. A pin spot searched the floor and stopped in a bright disc three feet from my aisle seat. Into it stepped a tall willowy creature in a slinky '30s style pink lace gown with white gloves to the armpits and a severely plastered back hairdo caught in a chignon. The regulars recognized it immediately as Kelly's stage persona, Dagmar Onassis, and went wild shouting and whistling. With an elegant staying gesture she quieted them, then took a deep breath and launched into the "Casta diva" aria from Bellini's opera "Norma". I don't know if it was the performer's appearance or voice that astounded me most, but I sat there with my mouth hanging open as the music built to its crescendo, the voice raising higher and higher in register. At the climax, there was only the slightest flick of a finger and a sideways glance of the eye to signal it was not to be taken too seriously, and the audience

erupted in laughter again. From then on it was the cleverest drag show I'd ever seen, simply because it was so restrained and delivered with dead seriousness, as if the great English comedienne Bea Lillie had popped a few pills backstage and decided to come on stage doing a straight impersonation of the mercurial opera diva Maria Callas.

I'd seen plenty of drag shows in my time, but Kelly's was markedly different. For one thing, he'd chosen the difficult task of appearing as one character doing an imitation of another. (It was all kept in the family, however, since Dagmar Onassis and Callas were 'theatrically' related, as we shall soon see.) In a weird way, it was a double-take on the Joe Chaikin "presence" thing. For another, it was Kelly's real voice doing the singing—not lip-synching to recordings—and its quality and timbre, to say nothing of range, was astonishing. I would have labeled it, as a New York Times critic did, a "pungent falsetto." But Michael Feingold of *The Village Voice*, ever the educator, informed us the correct term was *basso contratenore*, combining the best features of Ethel Merman and Alfred Deller (a well-known contemporary counter-tenor). Anyway, *contratenore* or fabulous falsetto, the voice and performer mesmerized me. But it would take another six or seven months to discover the other, even more remarkable attributes of this young man with matinée idol looks and the mind of a master illusionist.

We reached the corner kitchen area of the loft, and it was as cozy as a suburban breakfast nook. John opened the back door to reveal a compact rooftop terrace over the electrician's storage shed that looked like it would be a pleasant, private retreat in the hot months. Returning through a time warp of posters of former shows, we doubled back past the stair exit to the creative area of the loft. There a large drafting table slanted against the wall, full of notes and sketches for future presentations. Kelly, like Anton and Jesurun, was a visual artist before going into the theater, and his shows were planned like architectural progressions—each detail worked out with compass and T-square. Next to it, and for that matter scattered around the room, full-length mirrors caught reverse rectangles of opposite clutter. Kelly automatically eyed himself briefly, but critically, in each one as he passed, betraying the dancer's preoccupation with the right "look."

He led me to the living room area, dominated by two mismatched sofas facing each other across a coffee table that needed no label to identify its street origins. He pointed me to the one facing the big window where the restaurant dragon sidled past outside, partly obscured by sheets of taped up corrugated cardboard; trellises at each end held withered vines that traced their lineage back to unwatered pots on jaundiced newspapers on the floor, victims of too many out-of-town bookings. While he backtracked to the desk for some recent press reviews he wanted me to add to his file, I sank into the cushions and watched him: he had the same pigeon-toed gait that was his trademark on stage—it gave him a hesitant, vulnerable air that was appealing. Otherwise he looked very Joe College, in an open-necked shirt and slacks. He handed over the clippings and sat on the opposite sofa.

"Okay, shoot!" he said, finally acknowledging the reason I was there was to get to know his story in depth. I suggested we start right at the beginning.

"I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey. You want to know when? Do I have to say? I give different ages. Okay, I'll say September 21, 1954 (three years—give or take—after John Jesurun, and five after Robert Anton). My father's parents were born in Ireland. My father was a devout-DEVOUTCatholic. Admirable in a way. My mother is a housewife. I had two older sisters and two younger brothers. My oldest sister died of a brain tumor. My father worked for Trans America Insurance Company, but he was quite gifted as a visual artist, and I think I inherited that from him. That was my first vocation. But he never really did anything with it. He would paint from calendar photographs or something. Instead he decided to raise a family. Got married in 1947. That's what most people did then.

"My two older sisters were kind of my role models. My father was something of a semi-professional athlete, so I was forced into sports at an early age. [As a result] I used to sit in closets a lot just to get away—or up in trees, et cetera. Went to St. Aloysius Grammar School for eight years. Nuns. I was in Catholic High School

for four years with the Christian brothers. (Not a bitter experience), but I don't have much to say about the Catholic church at the moment. I admire people's faith. But I also have a disdain for exclusion and fear and people who read every word of the Bible and translate it...you know. Cardinal O'Connor, I think, is one of the most evil people that exist on this earth. I think the Pope is a total wimp because he's just not budging.

"You know. That's me and the church. I had it for twelve years. I was going to be a priest when I was young, because, as far as I was concerned, the only two options, as a man, were to go to war and be blown to bits or raise a family, which I didn't have any interest in doing. I kind of knew what my tastes were early on. But it was such a taboo thing. You know the first time I read the word "homosexual" was in *The New York Times*, in an article on Times Square about drug addicts, prostitutes, and homosexuals. You know. So it's in that camp.

"I was attracted to [classical music] the first time I was exposed to it. I remember in grammar school...a teacher in late grammar school. We used to sing Latin things with her and then I started listening to classical stations on the radio. But I didn't really get exposed to it until I was fifteen or sixteen. I was never exposed to it at home. You know, we'd see a ballet on the Ed Sullivan Show and my parents would snicker.

"[However], I *was* exposed to art by my parents. I was painting all the time. In high school I went to special classes in St. Peter's College after school—painting, sculpture, drawing. Then I had two really good art teachers in high school. I had planned to be a painter until I discovered musicals, also in high school, which I was in. I discovered I could dance really well.

"So now I said, 'I want to be a dancer', and I was trying to find out the best way to get training. But I was in high school, so that wasn't possible. So I basically had to wait until I got out...The September after I graduated I got enrolled as a scholarship student at the American Ballet School. I stayed there for two years,...commuting to Jersey City. At the same time, to keep my parents happy, I was an art major at Jersey City State College for two semesters. My parents' attitude to dance lessons? Well, of all things [I chose] it was the worst. Jersey City? Ballet? Their argument was, 'What are you going to do when you're forty?' That kind of thing.

"So I did college and ballet simultaneously (for a while). Then I went nuts and quit college, and just focused on ballet. I went to Harkness House for a trainee for a couple years...As a dancer I couldn't imagine myself being much better. [But] as a technician, there were some problems. I had really good line; I was flexible; I was extremely musical—I mean that's what dancing is, is moving to music. But for ballet, which is what I was really focusing on, my feet were strong but they weren't pretty. My hips were set—they weren't really turned out. I had a good jump, but there were problems.

"But I did a lot of performing while I was doing my ballet training... simultaneously dancing with Charles Weidman and a disciple of Alwin Nicolais, Jan Widinsky; [also] at the Dance Theatre Workshop, Cubiculo, American Theatre Lab, [and] toured a little bit. But at one point I realized what it was going to take for me to [continue to] do ballet. Everything was getting better, and I was really doing good, but I realized what it was going to require. I was going nuts, so I had to quit...it wasn't giving me anything back. It was like a bad affair that ended."

The phone rang, and he went over to the desk and picked up the receiver. No one answered, and he slammed it back in its stand.

"I hate that, don't you? When they don't say anything?" He settled back on the sofa with one leg folded under him.

"So. Oh, yeah, then I applied and got into Parsons [School of Design]. During that summer I worked at Sutter's café and made money. I [had] applied to Parsons as a graphics design major. When I got there I went into fashion illustration because I'd seen these incredible drawings that Antonio had done. I mean just really good drawings. They were fashion, but they were really excellent. But when I was there I realized there was no market and I really didn't like the people in the—department, so I switched to fine art—well, I didn't really switch. I just used it for fine art training. I took a class with Larry Rivers and found it was more interesting

to draw models with clothing on than it was to draw nude models. I mean, I did that too, but...

“Did you know Barbara Pearlman? I used to take her class at F.I.T. [Fashion Institute of Technology]. She was my mentor for years...and still a great friend. She really changed my life. She opened up the door to complete conviction and all that stuff, but made it really exciting. She’d play music in class, and I was her star pupil and all that. Then I started modeling for her. And that was actually me getting back to performing.

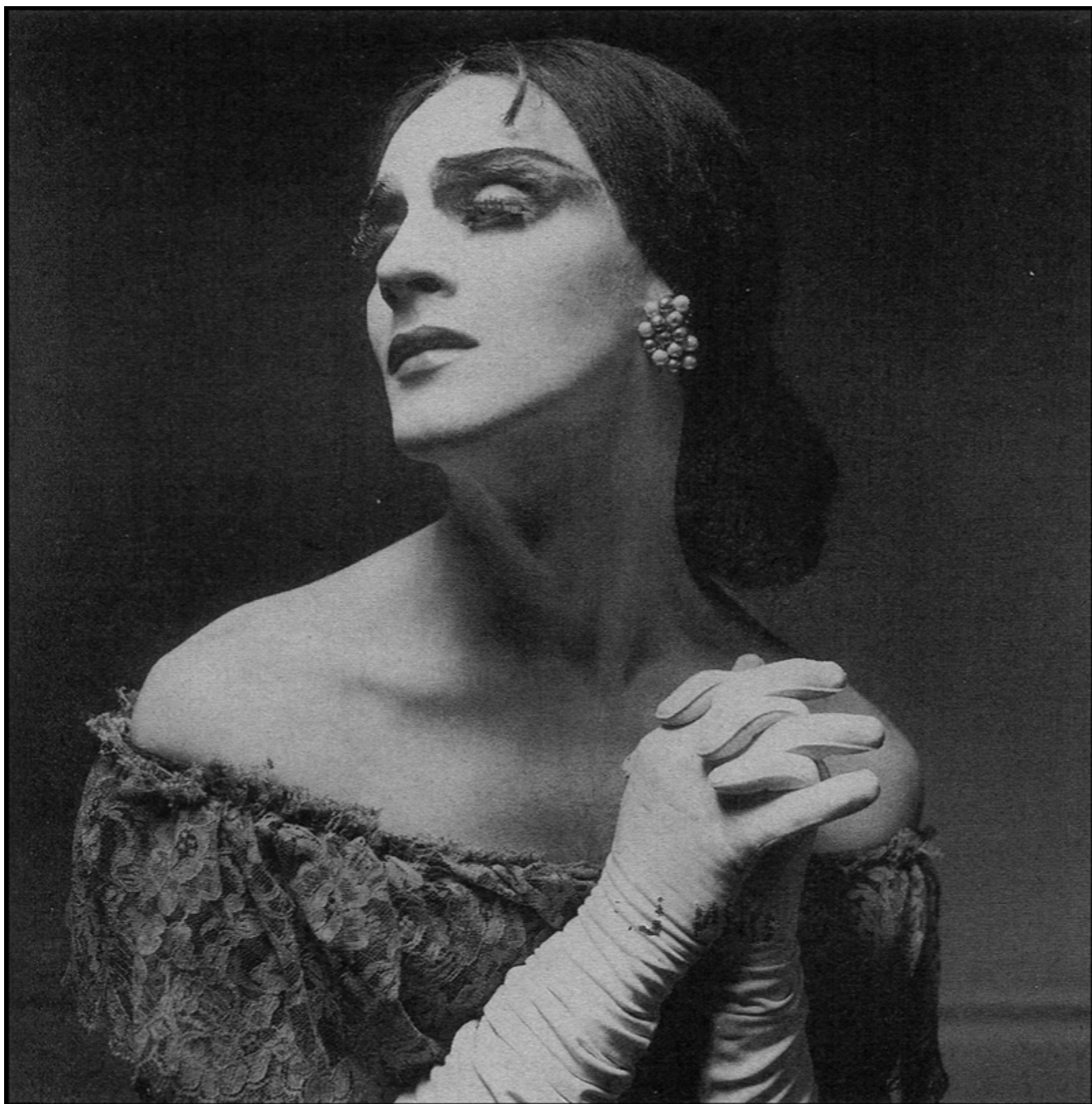
“But I quit Parsons after two years, [but continued] doing painting and drawing, being totally poor and broke..lots of self portraits—very confrontational, in the mirror with loud music playing. Much like a performance. And then I used to go to the Anvil [Robbie Anton’s secret S & M haunt] and sit above the staircase and draw. Then I saw this guy lip-synching Nina Hagen...” (the same Nina Hagen whose music the Shared Forms company used to accompany its production of *THE CAGE*) His name was Tanya Ransom—that was his drag name. Later we became good friends. [When he’d] lip-synch Hagen it was so androgynous; and it was, like, this force of nature, this *expression*. And I said, ‘Oh my god, I want to do that!’ [So] I began lip-synching Maria Callas at the Anvil.”

Here I mentioned that friends had seen one of those early performances and remembered all the comical details. It was on the First Wave night in 1979. The Anvil was packed with mostly leather types (well, leatherette: they wanted the look without the total commitment). When Kelly’s act began, all action in the back room and along the bar ceased temporarily as patrons crowded nearer to watch, some doffing their mean-looking visored caps, while others stuffed wads of toilet paper under the heavy chains encircling their boots to keep them from clanking disruptively. It was a sea of leather straps, vests, pants, harnesses, whips, body rings and tattoos.

Dagmar Onassis was born that night. Kelly called the character his “female alter-ego, the lost child of Maria Callas and Aristotle Onassis. Halfway through her first performance, Ruby Rims [a well-known, established drag artiste] gave her a dollar tip and Dagmar knew she had arrived. Dagmar remains my muse—whenever I get too much in my head, out come the heels!” Precisely made up to resemble the opera diva with heavily defined, elongated eyes and highly arched brows under a wig raked back into a bun, “she” was resplendent in a tastefully beaded gown (over torn fishnet stockings), long white gloves, and a choker-and-drop-earring set designed to wrench the most glitz possible out of a few globules of glass—what the gem industry terms “more flash for less cash”. A dark velvet stole protected one shoulder from the cool night air at the street-level landing of the stairs (the Anvil was a subterranean watering hole), where she appeared with a back-up group of four outrageously garbed drag queens puffing long cigarettes, and lip-synched the “Habanera” to a Callas recording of Bizet’s *Carmen*.

It was not only the night Dagmar became a legend; it was also when John Kelly began thinking there was a life—and living—out there beyond Sutters. (Dagmar became such a popular success that a decade later she was giving annual concerts at Carnegie Hall to a devoted following, and being photographed for the *STYLE* section of *The New York Times* entering or leaving fashionable clubs in full “dress” on the arms of handsome escorts. Kelly had created a legitimate biography for her that, with his own, graced subsequent playbills. It went something like this: John Kelly is Dagmar Onassis, the Greek American contralto who graced the stages of clubs and cabarets from New York City to Berlin in the early 1980s. Ms. Onassis has been hailed as a “singer of endless depth who spins a web of magic, allowing it to hang in the air for those few precious and tense moments before it pierces our hearts and leaves its imprints on our souls.” Dagmar is the daughter of a diva from our past, the great niece of Marcel Duchamp’s Rose Selavy. A long-time fan of the singer describes Dagmar’s performance as “a visceral realization of a dream, a manifestation of emotion crystallized through sound. “ Her repertoire includes arias and songs by Scarlatti, Cavalli, Monteverdi, Bellini, Boito, Purcell, Schumann, Mahler, Weill and Negro spirituals.)

My friend ended his account of the Anvil premiere with the audience’s reaction: “You never saw so much laughing leather in your life!”



JOHN KELLY as DAGMAR ONASSIS

Photo by John Dugdale

Kelly's introduction to the art of Maria Callas came one summer in the mid-1970s while basking on a waterbed beside a friend's pool on Fire Island. (It was on that same visit that, one day, he looked up from the pool to see the well-known artist David Hockney staring down at him; soon after that Hockney's famous series of paintings of youths in swimming pools was exhibited, and Kelly often wondered if he might have been an inspiration for one of them). His host, Arthur Lambert went in to put on a record. Kelly explained his reaction in his autobiographical piece "I Want Your Myth": "A sound came out of the house—it made my ears ring. I really didn't know opera at all at this point. But it was the voice. The singing—it was something that touched me deep inside, and I had no idea why. It was.. 'The Art of Maria Callas', a stereo recording made late in her career. It introduced me to a vast world of music, language and emotion—the abstract sound of music conjuring up feelings, times and places." He got to know and love opera after that, mainly from drawing and painting to her records.

His Callas act at the Anvil was so successful it encouraged him to expand his repertoire, and before long he was performing to the Buzzcocks and other weird punk bands, still lip-synching, still very androgynous. He moved on to other bars like the Mudd Club, and even did shows together with Tanya Ransom. Then Bill Bradley opened Pyramid Club and Kelly was on the first-night bill. He did the “Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian” in a upside-down corset and a black half-slip, and caused a sensation, bringing the act to a close with the end of “La Traviata”, where, just before she dies, the heroine Violetta sings deliriously that her pain is gone and life is returning; then, with a cry of ecstasy, falls back lifeless.

Kelly used the Dagmar persona in all of the entertainments: Dagmar as Callas, Dagmar as Mr. Butch from Teaneck, New Jersey, and later, Dagmar as Joni Mitchell. It “made it slightly more arty instead of just drag-queeny,” he confided during our conversation. “It’s like, once removed.” He even contemplated, as his fame spread, changing his name to the single “Dagmar”, as English artist Aubrey Beardsley did with “Salome” (the theater company he formed later was called Dagmar Collective, Inc.). His interest in cross-dressing “artistically” stemmed from childhood Halloween-gypsy days, when he’d dance all around the basement in dresses. “You know, being raised the way I was—in little baseball suits—and my father giving me novels about West Point in the 1920s...It was like a free thing.” At school he was always pulling his jacket up over his head and donning wire glasses to ape the nuns patrolling the corridors as his classmates tittered. Once he made an outfit inspired by Picasso’s bicycle-seat “Deer Head”, by slicing a football into two halves and connecting them with a rope to form a brassiere, as a gesture (possibly unconscious) of defiance against his father’s insistence on making him “manly.”

But much more importantly, an older high school friend took him on the PATH train to Manhattan in 1971 and introduced him to the Anderson Theater on Second Avenue and Fourth Street in the East Village (just doors away from the permanent home of La MaMa). There he saw his first drag entertainers, the Cockettes, a group out of San Francisco, who were appearing in an “epic travesty”, PEARLS OVER SHANGHAI. In “I Want Your Myth” he explained his reaction: “The theater was only one-fourth full, the show having bombed as it supposedly hadn’t lived up to New York expectations. But for me the show was a profound revelation. Live irreverent art. On this night I encountered two important heros. One was a man who sauntered down-stage wearing a long blue silk ‘30s something, obviously deprived of undergarments, and sang “Shanghai Lil” in a pin spot. Hero number two opened the second act—a large man who beautifully danced the Dying Swan in point shoes. Second whammy. Jersey City became an abstraction warranting retirement.”

As with John Jesurun, the Pyramid Club became Kelly’s performing lab. He experimented with rather elaborate male characters like St. Sebastian, Narcissus, and Orpheus. After giving birth to Dagmar he said, “an enormous reservoir of rage was vented. The closets were cleaned out, and I embraced an all-encompassing format of expression.” He and Jesurun had lunch together one day and Jesurun asked him if he’d be interested in acting in his currently running series, CHANG IN A VOID MOON. Kelly had seen the first few episodes and was anxious to give it a try—anything to expand his horizons at that point. But it wasn’t as easy as he thought it would be. “Sure,” he recalled, “I mean, I’m not a trained actor. I’ve never had an acting class and all that. His [Jesurun’s] scripts were really hard to memorize every week. And in those days I dabble...—you know I did my fair share of drugs and tequila and stuff...I wasn’t the most grounded person in the world, either.”

In a QW magazine cover story he elaborated further: “In the early days at the Pyramid there was this communal feeling. Everyone was on drugs and the space was small and we all contributed to our own performance, our own theater. People got out of their egos and just watched and let you take them someplace. With the drugs, everything was a lot more heightened. You’d be guiding them on this trip, which is what performance is all about. It was electric!”

He added to me, “But it [the CHANG series] worked really well—just the staging we would come up with every week! We didn’t get paid for it. (Jesurun told me that Kelly’s portrayal of the son was terrific, and he

admired Kelly very much after that, following his work with interest, even though they seldom got together again.) Kelly loved acting and took it in stride along with his own late-night entertainments. The only difference was that he got to like performing at 8:00 P.M., as he did in *CHANG*, instead of the accustomed after-midnight slots at the boltes, and hoped someday to be well-enough known to be booked in legitimate venues at the more civilized hour.

In his own acts he continued lip-synching to records until one fateful night when he returned to his Greenwich Village flat after a show to change in to his “tripping” clothes. He redressed in front of the mirror to Gluck’s “*Orfeo ed Euridice*.” To his surprise, instead of simply mouthing it, he found himself actually singing the high parts in a voice that sounded strange, but nice.

“I mesmerized myself,” he said, and found himself doing more of it—tentatively at first, then with more confidence—on the street, at home before the mirror, and in the shower. When he realized he had something worth developing professionally, he discovered Music-Minus-One and Audio-Sensa-Voce records, which were fully orchestrated except for one part—in his case, the voice—and began practicing in earnest. (He had to learn everything by ear since he couldn’t read music.)

“I knew I could do something with this. So I did a piece called *THE FORCES OF DESTINY* at the Pyramid. That was my singing debut. It was me on the floor coming through the audience with a life preserver on, screaming. It was all about fear and stage fright. I got to the stage and there was this fan blowing all this fabric. Then I improvised a cadence above [the orchestra of] the very beginning of the William Tell Overture the real quiet part. And that was the show: my singing debut. It was an amazing connection with the audience. They didn’t expect classical music. But it all worked. And it became this whole other part of my career. In fact, it eclipsed the choreography thing, et cetera.”

Once Kelly began using his own voice and introducing male characters in his acts, the press took notice, and he soon was getting reviewed. That led to touring and performing in the real theaters he dreamed of. One job took him to Berlin, Germany, in the summer of 1983. The Wall was still very much a dividing factor in the city. Visiting it and sensing its ugly significance had a devastating effect on him. When he returned he created a ten-minute version of what would later become the full-length piece *GO WEST JUNGER MANN*, and performed it at the Pyramid that November. Mark Russell saw it and urged him to expand it, promising to open it at P.S. 122, which he did one year later. Kelly’s relief was not at just being able to perform in a “real” theater instead of a cramped nightclub floor, but also a being able to do it at the civilized hour of 9:00 P.M. There was also the different attitudes of the audiences. People went to the clubs mainly to drink, dance, and have fun. Some resented being made to listen to a “bunch of operatic shit”. Once at the Pyramid, he had to fend off an irate patron who leaped at him, by grabbing a plastic lightning bolt from an elaborate ceiling decoration and jabbing him repeatedly in the chest, which, of course, ruined a rendition of the “*Sempre libera...*” aria from Verdi’s *La Traviata*, Act 1.

During that intervening year, John Kelly appeared with T.W.E.E.D., a producing company that helped develop unusual new talents and acts and presented them to the public, mainly at yearly festivals. It was founded by Kevin Maloney, whose innovative, sometimes irksome ideas sparked up the East Village scene for some time. T.W.E.E.D. introduced scores of new performers and playwrights, as well as composers and choreographers; its New Works Festivals each spring added immeasurably to the arts generally, as did its year-round multi-media events.

Mark Russell again urged me to come see the expanded version of *GO WEST JUNGER MAN* at P.S. 122, assuring me this time it would be nothing at all like I imagined from the Dagmar Onassis act. He was right. It told of a young, orange-haired East German graffiti artist named Wlademar Dix, who tried desperately to scale the Wall to freedom in the West and succeeded to the last foothold over the top, when he was gunned down unmercifully and fell back to the ground. Just before dying, he dreamed of a beautiful ballerina in a *sous-su* (long tutu) dancing ethereally through a winter forest and disappearing in a distant thicket of bare

branches. The dream metaphor was done in a black and white film projected on the Wall above the prostrate figure (shot by Anthony Chase). Both the young artist and the ballerina were portrayed by Kelly in an early blend of mediums that he would develop further in later, more ambitious works. As the ballerina in the film he danced *en pointe*, a feat he had mastered in his dancing days and would put to extensive use again in a year or so.

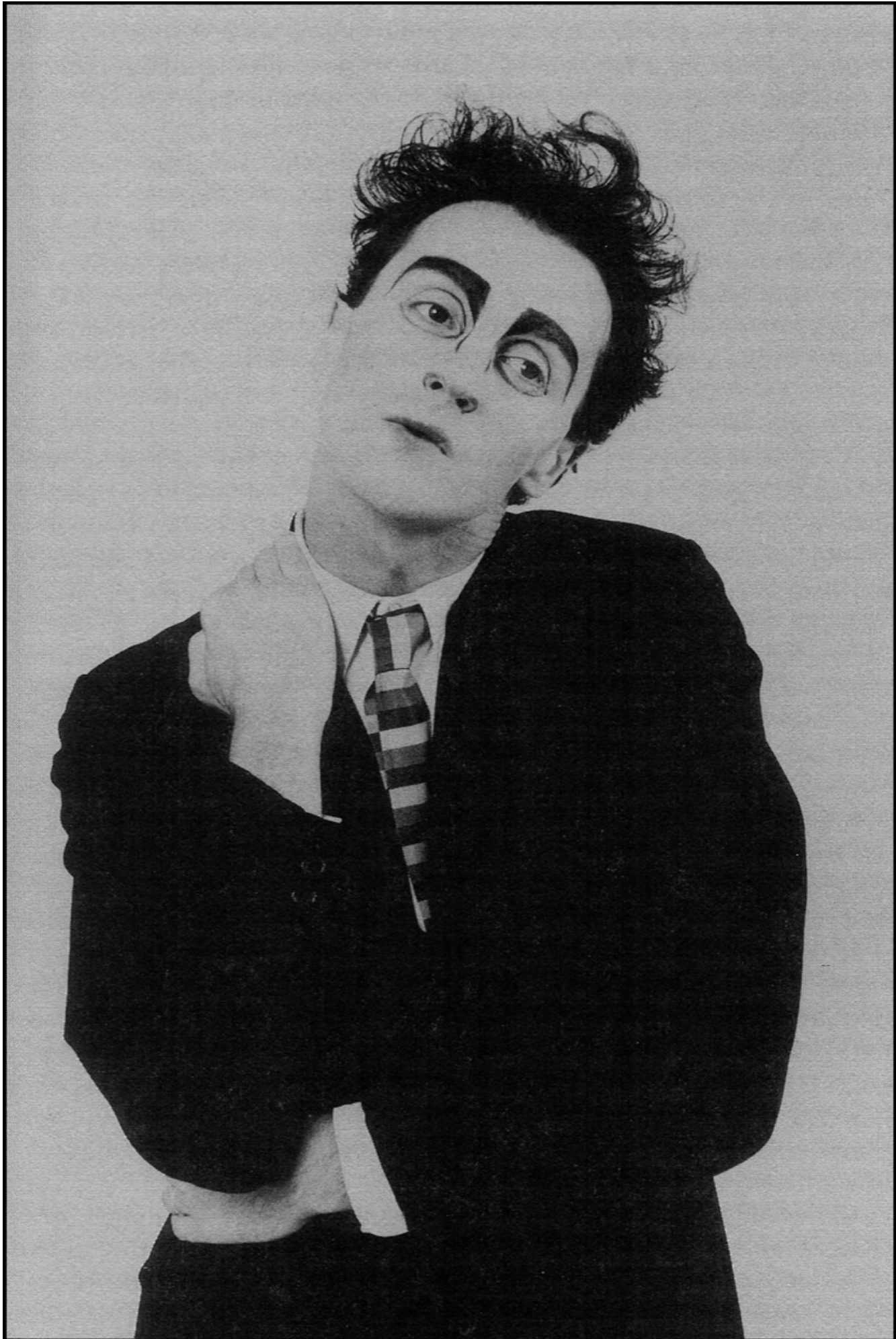
The setting was kept as simple as possible. In the original ten minute version at the Pyramid Club a rope was strung from the coat-check to the stage to represent the Wall, along which Kelly made his way symbolically to freedom, signified by the stage. An interesting aside, in that performance, as Kelly worked his way along, he was so overcome by the memory of what he had witnessed that summer, when he reached the stage he was sobbing out of control. It was an important lesson in learning how to harness his emotions before the public, and using his feelings to benefit the characterization instead of being overwhelmed by them. There was obviously a fine line there. Falling off the edge as he had done might have been exciting at the moment, but dangerous for the performer's concentration and development of the context. In the P.S 122 performance, there was just the bare floor, one wall of the theater with a rope dangling down it, the projected film and an original musical score composed and sound-tracked by Guy Story, with extraneous sound effects created by Stacy Grabert. Needless to say, it was profoundly moving, not least because, after Dagmar, it revealed the artist's versatility, imagination, and enormous potential.

Significantly, in the P.S 122 version, credits for "installation" went to Huck Snyder, another promising young visual artist Kelly first met at Inroads during the seminal stages of what would become the major project after this one, PASS THE BLUTWURST, BITTE. Huck then did some backdrops (on painter's drop cloths) for Kelly's early club shows. GO WEST JUNGER MANN began a close collaboration and friendship that lasted throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s. In a very real sense they matured in the theater together.

Snyder had also visited Berlin that summer of 1983 and shared a two person exhibit with Beatricia Sagar at the Sivia Meryel Gallery (They later shared another show, entitled "Back from Berlin—Little Red Riding Hood in Limbo" at the Limbo Theater Gallery in New York.) His full name was Harry William Snyder IV, and he was born in Lansdale, PA. in 1954. He graduated from William and Mary College in Williamsburg, VA. and attended the Goethe Institute while he was in Berlin. Sharply featured and nervously intent, Huck broadcast his dedication to the avant-garde esthetic with strikingly unconventional and eye-catching attire. Once, I encountered him on a Broadway Local subway heading uptown, garbed in an acid green sweatshirt over black tights and oddly patterned sneakers, under a ratty overcoat. From one ear dangled a long pendant. His hair was spiky and dyed a color that was probably meant to be bright yellow (his natural hair shade was brown), but looked mildewed under the unremitting overhead fluorescent. For a moment I was reminded of the in-your-face young rebels flaunting their subversive fashion statements in London's East End a decade earlier. Huck, it turned out, did it out of an outrageous sense of fun and the shock value, rather than some political or social send-up.

He was extremely outgoing and made many friends in the theater and dance worlds, for whom he created sets and stage pieces. But his name was inevitably linked with Kelly's. His most successful work resulted from their collaboration. Wildly surreal, roughly made, and almost childlike in concept and execution, his creations became visual extensions of Kelly's ideas, as if they emerged from one source, and some of his work, like the multi-level "boxes" for Kelly's 1991 production of MAYBE IT'S COLD OUTSIDE—that some critics hailed as his best artistic efforts—could stand alone as sculptural entities. Snyder received Bessie Awards in 1985 and 1991, and a 1988 Obie Award for Sustained Excellence in Scenic Design, and was nominated three times (1987, 1988, 1991) for American Theater Wing Awards. His paintings and installations were exhibited around the United States, Japan, and Europe, and he conceived, designed, and directed a performance art piece, CIRCUS, that had a run at LA MaMa E.T.C. in 1987.

Full collaboration began in earnest with *DIARY OF A SOMNAMBULIST* in February 1986. Its inspiration was early German Expressionist films, especially “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.” The sets, all black and white, and the exaggerated acting style of Conrad Veidt (Caligari’s original dark protagonist Cesare) were what effected the piece’s brooding atmosphere. The two rooms that comprised the Limbo Theater, where it was performed—one the permanent art gallery, the other the performing space—were converted for the purpose into a progressive nightmare of light and shadow. The gallery contained mostly black and white self-framed prints that introduced motifs Snyder would incorporate and embellish in the theater “surround,” such as repeated circular clock faces with gothic numerals and hands shaped like a devil’s tridents—not so much telling time as threatening it. (I liked one of the prints so much I bought it to add to my collection of works by promising young artists.)



PASS THE BLUTWURST, BITTE (1989) By John Kelly (shown)

Photo by J. Kelly

The Limbo Theater, on East Ninth Street near Tompkin Park, had only recently been converted from a once-swinging/now-defunct night club, Limbo Lounge, into an intimate showcase for offbeat performance

art, by a pair of enterprising former N.Y.U. students named Denise Lancot and Randy Rollison. (The presentation of *DIARY OF A SOMNABULIST* proved successful enough for them to consider seeking larger, more accessible quarters, and soon thereafter they found space on Walker Street in Tribeca and, with help from our Foundation, moved operations there. The name was changed to Home for Contemporary Theater and Art, but the emphasis was still on new playwrights and emerging visual artists, still in two separate rooms.)

John Kelly, in the role of Cesare, was appropriately flour-faced and kohl-eyed as he sleep-walked through the piece from one “movie” set to another, accompanied by actress Marleen Menard (who, with this part and a brief appearance in *GO WEST JUNGER MANN*, became the first regular supporting player in his troupe) as a gossamer-gowned pusillanimous damsel in more-or-less-dire distress. Film again was incorporated (by Anthony Chase) and chilling still photographs (by John Dugdale) to music by Marek Weber, Giuseppe Verde, Giacomo Puccini, Henry Purcell, Georges Bizet, Igor Stravinsky, Aram Khachaturian, Samuel Barber, and Paul Whiteman, sound mixed by Guy Story. And then there was that remarkable cabinet—an angular abstract creation by Huck Snyder—into which all the action disappeared without a trace at the end, leaving the audience to contemplate the creepy cryptic designs on the walls and ceiling in wonder (cleverly lit by John Dugdale).

Soon after the run of *SOMNABULIST*, I visited the basement headquarters Kelly and Snyder shared on Grand Street on the lower East Side to pick up the print that Huck was reframing for me. The steps down from the sidewalk brought back visions of my own first studio on Bank Street, also underground with direct access to the street. When Huck let me in, I eyed the walls reflexively for tell-tale evidence of occasional waterfalls like those that cascaded down mine when someone’s upstairs plumbing mutinied. (There was none.) Parked along both sides of the narrow room were his current constructions-in-progress, jutting wicked angles at us like a cubistic obstacle course as we passed. We lingered over some of them, him telling me what shows they were for or what scene they would represent, and when we reached the rear he produced the re-framed print for my approval. Then he explained that we’d explored only part of the basement. It had been divided lengthwise with a door near where we stood, and the other half was John Kelly’s workshop. John was in there at the moment. Did I want to meet him? “Certainly,” I said, and Huck rapped softly on the door. At the muffled response, he opened it onto yet another maze of props and boxes bulging with fabrics and costumes. Back almost to the street, Kelly was seated at a makeshift bench cluttered with arrays of grease paint jars, colored pencils, and sketches, scrutinizing his starkly lit image in a mirror against the wall, framed in bare light bulbs. A nearby portable softly played music crackling with static. The place had the acrid, unventilated smell of backstage.

Kelly turned as Snyder called out “Company”, and we laughed at the sight of him. A sweatband held back the hair from his forehead. Half his face had been transformed with brownish makeup rubbed in the hollow of the cheek and a heavily drawn eyebrow shaped like a giant staple that arched up, across, and down over a shaded eyelid. His lips were timbered. The rest of his face, and what made the contrast so amusing, was its normal handsome self. Amazing what a little makeup could do. Snyder did the introductions. John rose and wiped his hand on his jeans before shaking mine, then shyly stepped back a pace. His reticence was unexpected after what I’d seen of him on stage. I learned later that his shyness was not inherited, but acquired during a childhood of being forced into patterns of behavior alien to his nature. Stories of military heroes, sports figures and saints were imposed on him, but his secret loves were “reproductions of Renaissance paintings, Galina Ulanova dancing the Dying Swan on the Ed Sullivan Show, ‘Lola’ by the Kinks,” and the music of Joni Mitchell and (like Anton and Jesurun) the Doors. All that had to be repressed behind a facade of timidity. Better not to let anyone know, lest he be misunderstood or, worse, censured.

It was our first meeting face to face and, after some initial unease, we developed a good rapport. He pointed out that he was playing around with makeup ideas for a new piece he was working on called *PASS THE BLUTWURST, BITTE* (The Egon Schiele Story). It was to be based on the life and art of that early Twentieth

Century Viennese painter. Barbara Pearlman, his drawing teacher at Parsons, introduced him to Schiele back in the classroom, and the neo-Expressionist's renderings of gaunt, angular nudes with tortured faces struck an immediate chord of identity, along with his unmercifully honest and revealing self-portraits.

"Something intangible got to me, this time resulting from reaction to the two dimensional image, casting me into a relationship with an item that would become a major part of my creative life—the mirror. The vehicle of the self-portrait, the door into the mysteries of the self." It was not until 1986 that he would be able to recreate the experience to his satisfaction, and then it was on a stage instead of a canvas. But he continued to turn out self-portraits in the style of Schiele that he stored away together like a visual diary (of which I was given a glimpse during the long conversations we had in the 1990s on which much of this account is based).

Egon Schiele, born near Vienna in 1890, was first influenced by the Impressionists, and then by his fellow Austrian Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), who was the founder of Vienna Secession (the Austrian equivalent of Art Nouveau), and who abandoned his earlier unremarkable naturalistic style in 1898 to embrace a more decorative and symbolic approach to painting, filled with arabesques and busy patterns. Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka (born in 1886) became the leaders of the expressionist resurgence in Vienna sometime after 1910. Schiele developed a highly original mode of drawing, characterized by angular, nervous lines and poses of human nude figures—male and female—that were at once grotesquely distorted and sexually charged. Torn by tortuous self-doubts in spite of his outward narcissistic posturings, plagued by disastrous love affairs (his masochistic tendencies were well known), and imprisoned for pornography, he poured it all into his canvasses with choppy brush strokes and brilliant, sometimes screaming colors (orange was a favorite). He gained a unique place among the expressionists of the time, but his influence was aborted by a final stroke of misfortune: he became the victim of an influenza epidemic in 1918, and died at the age of twenty-eight.

I visited Vienna in 1987 and saw an exhibit of Schiele's work at the Secession Museum. I was surprised to see long lines waiting to be admitted; I remembered his drawings from art school days, but mostly mention of his name then brought only a quizzical "Who?", he was that little known. I had forgotten that, after falling in decline during the two World Wars and even well into the 1960s, his work had slowly gained new popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in a 1986 Museum of Modern Art exhibit of Viennese art featuring his paintings, and a record-breaking sale of his drawings at auction at Sotheby's, New York, in the late 1980s, that put his name in headlines in newspaper arts sections and glossy trade quarterlies. His style spoke anew to a generation of youth alienated by post-Vietnam and the vagaries of life after Woodstock and mired in the drug subculture that followed. When I finally gained admittance to the museum that raw chilly October afternoon, the aspect of Schiele's oeuvre that impressed me most was his treatment of the selfportrait—here used as a model for Christ on the cross in several paintings, with vivid orange backgrounds and his understanding of the importance of hands in portraits. Sinewy, twisted, and agonized, they clawed at the frames restraining them and ultimately at my brain.

PASS THE BLUTWURST, BITTE opened on November 6, 1986, at the Dance Theater Workshop's Besse Schoenberg Theater (she for whom the annual Performance Art and Dance Awards, the "Bessies", were named). It was no mere documentary. In fact, there was no dialogue at all, simply free-form scenes that included dance, film and Kelly singing some arias from Verdi. The background score was taken from compositions by, among others, Berg, Beethoven, Purcell, Mussorgsky, and Strauss, with snippets of recordings by the Vienna Boys Choir. Mel Gussow in *The New York Times* (November 8, 1986) considered the piece as much an expression of art as an impression of the artist. The makeup I had seen being developed in its early stages had been perfected so that he looked very much like the original—the strange eyebrows, darkened eyes, and spiky hair, and then the partly nude emaciated body, augmented at every turn by starkly effective lighting (designed by Roma Flowers). It was most vividly effective when Kelly moved behind a clear plexiglas panel on which still photographs of Schiele's selfportraits were projected, making them come eerily to life as he inched past.

What followed were brief biographical scenes done as blackouts. The first, and funniest, depicted Schiele's initial encounter with the woman named Willi (played by Marleen Menard) who would become his mistress and model. It took place in a café, and Kelly smiled telling me of an incident at one of the performances: it was "the sausage scene with Marleen. She was being a real pill because she had stopped drinking and stopped smoking—I don't know. She was being a real bitch. And she also hated one of the guys in the cast. Just hated him. And [as the waiter] he has to bring her out the sausage. So I put one of those weird golden Russian dried fish on [the platter]. But she thought he had done it. She was giving him the dirtiest looks. And so I said [to myself] 'when I got out there, I hope she doesn't try to put that fish in my mouth or something.' She didn't, but her continued venomous glares kept him on edge throughout the cut, threatening the effectiveness of the supposed romantic encounter.

Menard returned in other vignettes as the model in Schiele's studio, and then finally as the symbol of death, Influenza, gilded and robed to look like one of Klimt's famous paintings of Pallas Athena. The other female in the cast, Vivian Trimble, portrayed the woman Schiele married after he was released from prison. Her delicate portrayal was in deep contrast to the heavier acting of the French Canadian Menard, and so when something went awry in a performance, it was far more noticeable and difficult to cover. "One night in BLUTWURST," Kelly recalled, "when the wife [Trimble] was lying there and I'm singing to her and we're in our underwear and she's looking up at me, she sees me look funny and try to signal her with my eyes, because there's this roach crawling up her arm. And so I kept stroking at it and she's wondering why I'm pawing her like this and looking at me funny." The two were in panic for fear that the bug would reach her face and the brighter lighting before he could squash it without breaking the spell of the lovely aria. Luckily, that time it took a left turn and disappeared under her elbow, all without her knowledge. But when the company repeated the piece at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C. in 1988, damned if in the same scene a moth didn't fly in on them unawares and keep landing on her cheeks and mouth as she tried to maintain a sylph-like composure. "That was a cursed scene," Kelly concluded, laughing at the memory.

The most exciting moment of BLUTWURST was when Kelly portrayed Schiele portraying himself being crucified. It was done in stop action movements like the effects gotten with strobe lighting. That "crucifixion scene in the show I got from all those drawings he did in prison. You know, with the orange blanket. It looks like he's being suspended. And the blackouts—night, day, night, day. Being suspended. The boredom of repetition. With a weird sound track. It all came to me through his work." He was less interested in the decorative quality of Schiele's work, than in its macabre aspects. "When I was in art school, I was fanatical about his work, and was very much influenced by him. I liked the deliberate kind of bizarreness. His life story reads like a screen play. I always knew that he just tapped into these parts of me." (The early version, when he first met Snyder, was a ten-minute sketch at the Pyramid Club done in drag, by the way, just to show the thought and development that went into the play from 1983 to 1986.)

Throughout the scenes, Kelly/Schiele was shadowed by two other actors (Jan Baracz and Hayo David), made up like him and called Alter Egon I and Alter Egon II. These apparitions wove eerily in and out of sight—"his doppelgängers," who moved Schiele about the stage like a bunraku puppet, dancing a pas de trois. There was a slight oriental flavor to the work, but basically the style was Viennese black and white, with effective costumes by Trine Walther and sets by Huck Snyder.

PASS THE BLUTWURST, BITTE sealed Kelly's reputation. One critic likened his grace to that of Charlie Chaplin's, able to convey slapstick, tragedy, and abstraction in one light gesture, as well as being able to convey Schiele's predicaments as his own. BLUTWURST's success encouraged him to pursue the story medium further. "Full evening shows like that are what I love to do most," he confided. "They are my murals. The concerts are my sketches."

From the opening bit in BLUTWURST, when he came on in baggy pants and cranked up an old record player, then carefully set the needle down and listened to the scratchy sound of some nineteenth century

melody, then lifted the needle again and pushed the phonograph into the wings, to the final Romantic aria sung in his distinctive falsetto without any campy embellishments, it was clear that the New York theater world had a remarkable new star in its midst. Having won a Bessie Award earlier that spring for “an extended body of work,” John Kelly received his first Obie for *PASS THE BLUTWURST, BITTE* in 1987, as well as the American Choreographer Award.

About awards generally he would later say, “The first Bessie I got I really wanted. Like, Huck had won one the year before and I thought I... deserved one. The first Obie was, like, I didn’t even know I was going to get one. [At the ceremony] Huck pushed me up and said, ‘Go get it! There you go!’ So, the second Obie was fine, but it wasn’t as thrilling as the first. And the second Bessie was fine, but it wasn’t as thrilling as the first. So, it’s really the first time you get these things [that matters]—to get the recognition. It’s great as far as I’m concerned, though it didn’t really make that much difference. I feel like each time I do something I’m up against a myth that people have about me and you can’t fuck up, whether you have awards or not. And I never wanted to remain in the funky world and the less visible aspects.”

So he’d achieved what he dreamed of—a legitimate venue in which to perform and audiences receptive to his new work. The logical thing would have been to build on that immediately with more of the same. But he didn’t. For some inexplicable reason (probably even to him) he went off on a completely different tangent for the better part of the next year. He joined the Ekatherina Sobechanskaya and Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet (it’s full name)—an all-male ballerina troupe—as a featured danseuse!

A partial explanation might have been that Kelly found out that the man behind the moniker Ekatherina Sobechanskaya, and founder of the troupe, was none other than the “large man who beautifully danced the Dying Swan in point shoes” with the Cockettes that mind-popping night in 1971 when he was first introduced to drag acts in the East Village. (The other performer on the program that night who also impressed him—the one who sang “Shanghai Lil” in the blue gown—ended up being his upstairs neighbor on Twenty-seventh Street.) In daylight Ekatherina was Larry Ree, and the “Trocks,” as it was affectionately dubbed by aficionados and reviewers, began life soon after the Cockettes ended their not-wildly-successful run the same year. Lee’s aspirations for the company had more to do with artistry than high camp, although the sight of eleven or so muscular young men in tutus twirling about *en pointe* was bound to elicit guffaws. His aim was to form a troupe for male dancers who wanted, but couldn’t under normal circumstances, to do classical female roles in feminine costumes in standard ballet repertoires, adhering as closely as possible to traditional choreography. Each member had to be an experienced ballet dancer to be accepted, but not necessarily as lithe as, say, the willowy performers in the American Ballet Theatre or New York City Ballet. So a fair amount of imaginative leeway had to be allowed by the audiences when they sat down to watch a recital. My introduction to the troupe at a recital at La MaMa E.T.C. brought visions of the hippo ballet in Walt Disney’s “Fantasia,” and I came close to having to leave the theater with a case of irrepressible giggles.

As might be expected, Ree was constantly plagued by mutiny in the ranks. Every ballerina, no matter what status, considered herself prima. He tried to keep it a “serious” dance company, even when some of the soloists began playing for laughs and bravas. But sometime in 1974 or thereabouts, a roly-poly *étoile en tutu* named Tamara Karpova, a.k.a. Anthony Bassae (they all took outrageously Russian-sounding stage names for the playbills; one, I remembered, Richard Goldberg, became Olga Plushinskaya), who had been overdoing the bows at the end of her performance, offended Mme. Sobechanskaya—she was always called “madame” by troupe members—to the point where harsh words were exchanged. Karpova left in a huff with half the company trailing tulle behind her, and formed a rival troupe, the Monte Carlo Ballet Company, which danced for a few years in fierce competition until ruffled feathers were smoothed and she, and the other defectors, returned to safe haven under Madame’s sequined wing in 1976.

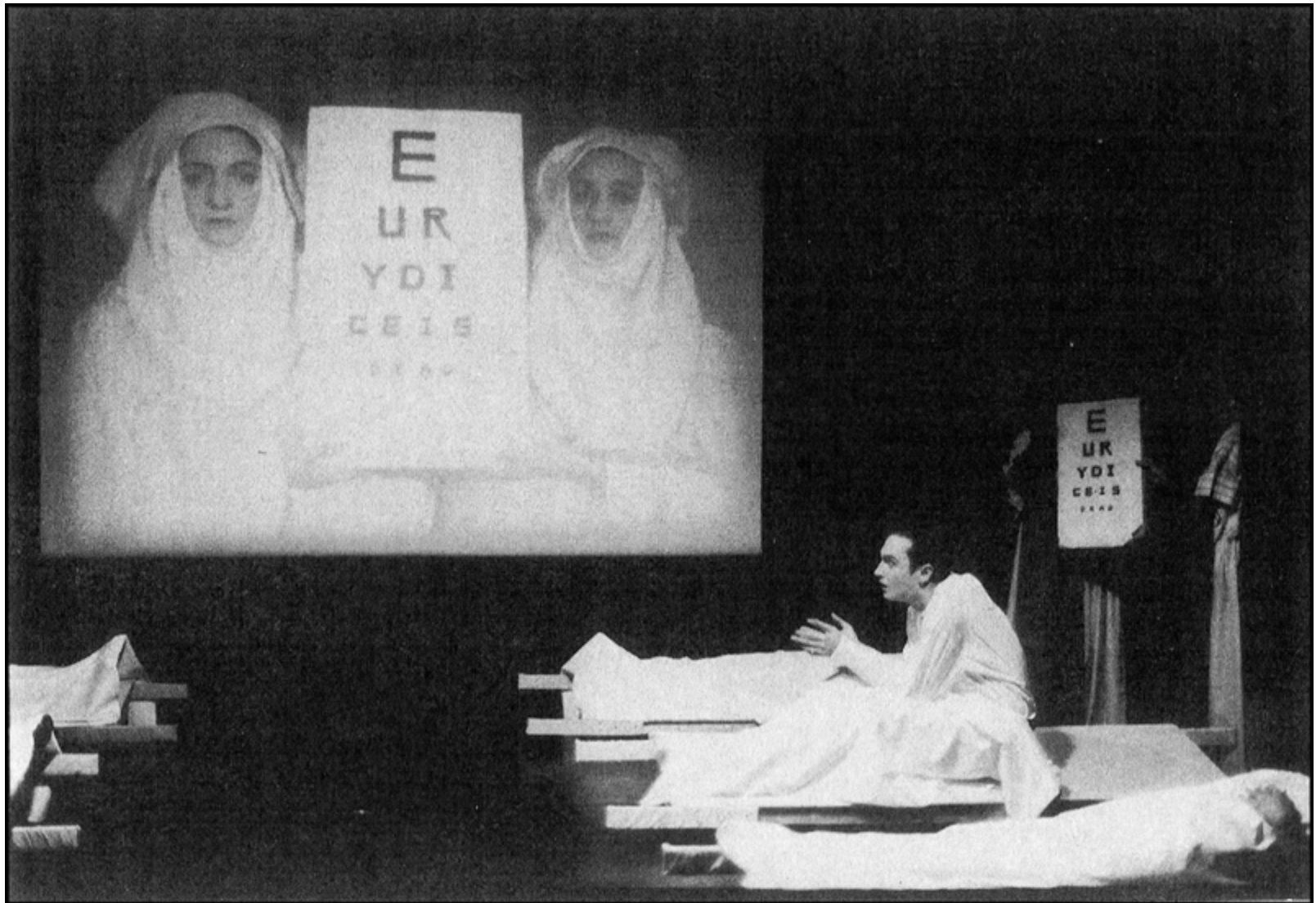
For the most part the reviewers treated the group with straight face and only a hint of tongue in cheek. Of the performances, one wrote there wasn’t any campiness, burlesque or ridicule about them, but a great deal

of love of pure dance, and elegance, in spite of the fact that the viewer had to overlook a few pouty-looking mouths where moustaches had been plastered down with heavy makeup. (Armpits were generally shaved.) These were men engaging in a fantasy existence, reinventing gender.

One number on a 1987 program at La MaMa may have given a clue to the reason why Kelly had joined those exotic ranks. It was called THE TRANS-SIBERIAN EXPRESS, and he wrote it and directed the other members in it. It was not a dance, but a playlet, about the single-mindedness of theater people for whom life was the stage and stage was their life, and gave him the opportunity to expand his playwrighting possibilities. It tells the story of a ballet star and her “girls” as they finish up a performance and pack up to get the next train to the next gig. Then they are on the train (in twelve folding chairs), each one settling in and doing her own cozy thing, like knitting, reading, snoozing, dishing. The train picks up speed and then crashes, spewing dead ballerinas about the car—each in the pose of “The Beautiful Death.” The star, called Madame, has survived, however, and makes a coldly calculated tour of the situation. After ascertaining that all the others have, indeed, perished, she returns to the little stage within a stage where the playlet began at the side of the performance area and bows in curtain call after curtain call to recorded applause, as the lights dim. It was mordant wit at its most delicious.

It was not all toe shoes and tutus during that period, of course. While he was dazzling the balletomanes with his *ports de bras*, *arbesques*, and *grands jetés*, Kelly was mentally reviewing and redefining his concepts of the Orpheus legend that had fascinated and haunted him since that fateful day when he first began lip-synching at the mirror to a recording of Gluck’s “Orfeo ed Euridice.” In the final version, which he titled FIND MY WAY HOME, the original Greek myth was adhered to in essence, but updated to the twentieth century. In Ancient Greece, Orpheus was supposed to have been able to make trees and rocks dance to the music of his lute. He was the son of Apollo, the God of Music, and Calliope, the Muse of Epic Poetry. In the story, his young wife Eurydice was killed and her spirit taken to the Underworld. Orpheus’s grief was so intense that he vowed to get her back. He planned to charm the Furies, who guarded the Underworld, with his singing. It worked, and he was allowed to retrieve her on condition that he not look back at her once until they reached the surface again, or she would be lost to him forever. Orpheus couldn’t control himself, however, and as they began to see the light of day, he turned back a moment too soon, and she vanished. After that he wandered in the wilds, forsaking all human company, and continued playing for the rocks, trees, and rivers. A fierce band of Thracian women, followers of the god Dionysus, found him and killed him, throwing his severed head into the river Hebrus, where it continued to call for Eurydice. It was finally carried to the shores of Lesbos, where the Muses buried it. By mythological tradition, his lyre became the constellation Lyra in the heavens.

Kelly’s version began in an elegant uptown New York apartment where two couples in evening attire were partying with champagne and dancing to what sounded like the 1930 songs of Cole Porter and Noel Coward. They offhandedly threw their empty glasses on the floor for the maid (Kyle de Camp) to pick up. As she cleaned she dreamed of her idol, a famous radio crooner, name of Orfeo, who, she knew, had been hired by her employer, the hostess of the party, Lamorte (Marleen Menard). Orfeo arrived (John Kelly in modern clothes), and, as he entertained the guests, fell in love with the maid, who, Cinderella-like, metamorphosed into a gorgeous creature in a red gown named Eurydice. The two left the apartment in each other’s embrace, as Lamorte seethed with jealousy back in her sumptuous Art Deco living room (Huck Snyder, who designed the sets and props, really outdid himself here). In her fury, she had the two lovers hit by an auto as they ambled down the street. (The crash effects were made by careening spotlights). Eurydice was killed and Orfeo wound up in the hospital, blinded. When he found out the fate of his beloved, he tried to throw himself under a fast moving train, but one of Lamorte’s friends (John Beal) rescued him just in time and showed him the way to the Underworld, here a speakeasy run by—you guessed it—Lamorte herself, where she kept Eurydice prisoner. When Orfeo tried to free Eurydice and take her back to the Upperworld, a great ruckus ensued, with Lamorte bashing him over the head with a champagne bottle. It all looked less like the mythological Underworld than, say, a SoHo art gallery having a surrealistic opening reception.



FIND MY WAY HOME (1988) By John Kelly

Photo by Paula Court

But for that scene Kelly choreographed a wonderfully furious Furies dance, in which the actors swirled life-sized dummies around. At one performance (at Dance Theater Workshop in late March 1988) the dummy Marleen Menard was operating split in half at the waist and the legs flew across the stage behind where Kelly was soulfully crooning to the audience under a pin spot. "All those ball bearings went all over the floor," he recounted. "The audience was in hysterics. Then another performer picked up the legs and flung them into the wings. And I'm there, trying to sing (seriously), and getting pissed because everybody's laughing." He, being in front of the action and facing away, didn't see any of it. It also happened to be the night a video was being taped of the performance, and Menard's sudden squeal of laughter was picked up very clearly on the sound track.

After the whack on the head by the bottle, Orfeo dazedly lead Eurydice out of Hades, but her incessant screaming was giving him a headache, and he couldn't help turning around to quiet her. When he did, of course, she and the entire scene vanished and he was left alone. He should have been singing the blues again, but when his mouth opened, out poured his high soprano rendering of an aria from Gluck's "Orfeo ed Euridice."

During all the preceding scenes, music had been a constant companion to the action. While the maid Eurydice was mooning in the first scene about her crooner, she flipped stations on an old wireless, and the alert listener could have detected some of the numbers she rejected as Ruth Etting singing "Shaking the Blues Away" and Kate Smith rendering "How Deep Is The Ocean?," and throughout the play a remarkably professional-sounding trio of singers (Tom Bondi, Jennifer Pace, and Elizabeth Pressman) performed excerpts from the Gluck opera at a far side of the stage. One effective choice for Orfeo, after discovering the loss of Eurydice the first time around, was Noel Coward's "I'll See You Again," and his entrance into Lamorte's Underground speakeasy was accompanied by a blast of "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise," by George Gershwin. Supposedly

dissimilar styles of music were blended neatly here, including excerpts from work by Alban Berg, Frederick Hollander, and Modest Mussorgsky and Giuseppe Verdi, along with that of Christoph Willibald von Gluck himself, (ably conducted in the production by Jeff Halpern, who also played the piano while Christine Gummere handled the cello). Other actors who filled sundry roles, from Upper East Side Sophisticates to whirling Underworld Furies, were Vivian Trimble (who had been so effective in *BLUTWURST*) and Byron Suber. The lavish costumes were designed by Gary Lysz, and Stan Pressner did wonders with lighting.

To relate the next episode of John Kelly's career—a performance piece he titled *A WAY WITH WORDS: JOHN KELLY as DAGMAR ONASSIS* sings like JONI MITCHELL, part of an ambitious project produced by En Garde Arts originally intended to be performed by various artists in selected small bedroom apartments all over the legendary Chelsea Hotel in January 1989—it is first necessary to backtrack a bit and discuss both En Garde Arts and the Chelsea Hotel to set the background for the generally acknowledged fiasco it became (no fault of his).

En Garde Arts was the brainchild of an irrepressible young woman named Anne (Annie) Hamburger—"just like at McDonalds." I first heard of her from Lloyd Richards, then the dean of the Yale School of Drama, who called to say an extraordinary recent graduate of the theater administration department (she received her degree in 1986) was about to hit New York by storm, and we should be prepared either to help her get a start or look out for flying glass. He added that she was talented, serious, and hot! "Hamburger is the Joseph Papp of the twentieth century," echoed Ben Mordecai, chairman of the department. I had the feeling everyone up in New Haven regarded her highly but, not knowing quite how to cope with this hurricane force in their midst, gave it a wide berth while keeping one eye fixed on the center. They certainly realized they had a unique dynamo on their hands when, instead of following the standard route of internship in the Yale Repertory Theatre as a third year assignment, she requested and was allowed to found a site-specific theater company instead, which became En Garde Arts.

Hamburger's goal from the outset was to bring theater to the neighborhoods, instead of vice versa. Her first effort was something called *THE RITUAL PROJECT*, performed on the side of a hillock in Central Park; then she rented an abandoned auto showroom on the lower East Side for *TERMINAL BAR*, a play about the last place left after some unspecified global destruction, that was as chilling as the unheated, drafty, and cheerless setting (it was midwinter); she contracted playwright Mac Wellman to create a piece that could incorporate the graceful Bow Bridge in Central Park in midsummer, called *BAD PENNY*, and played mostly from rowboats; Wellman again wrote another play, *CROWBAR*, that was set in the about-to-be-demolished interior of the once-splendid Victory Theatre on Forty-second Street. Other works were set in: a Harlem warehouse, a Greenwich Village meat market, and various midtown churches, as well as an unfinished apartment complex on the Lower West Side.

No stranger, by now, to the frustrating ambiguities involved with city bureaucracy, property owners, and the Safety Commission, to say nothing of street confrontations with homeless zanies and unbending Mafioso members, Hamburger actually reveled in her ability to achieve the seeming impossible. Attractive, buoyant and brash, she handled cement heads down at City Hall with the same aplomb as the artists under her temporary care and their sometimes equally preposterous demands: for the Chelsea Hotel Project, for example, that meant finding a housebroken goat for the Squat Theater troupe; a 120-foot-long table for the outdoor meat butchers play; and, most bizarre of all, two midgets, one set of Siamese twins, and a stone-deaf actor for Charles Mee's *ANOTHER PERSON IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY*. (Her phone exchanges with Actors Equity over the hiring of the Siamese twins must have been priceless: "Would that be one Equity contract or two?") But with the Chelsea Hotel venture in early 1989, she was stopped cold by the mightiest protagonist of them all so far—the intractable N.Y.C. Fire Department.

Initially, the idea of presenting several evenings of original acts relating to historical events and people connected with the Chelsea was inspired. Built in 1883, the twelve-story structure at 222 West Twenty-third

Street (then the tallest building in New York City) was a legend almost from the beginning. Originally intended as a prototype of co-op living for ten rich families, it went bankrupt and closed in 1903, only to open as a hotel two years later—with the original quarters divided up in such a haphazard way that no two units were alike. After three decades it went bankrupt again, and was bought by David Bard in 1939. He, and later his son Stanley, attracted the artists and freewheeling spirits that eventually gave it its Bohemia reputation. In the 1930s it was filled with radicals; in the war years of the 1940s, British sailors; the 1950s brought the Beatniks, the 1960s the hippies; and in the 1970s and 1980s superstar artists like Julian Schnabel, Philip Taaffe and James Brown. But throughout its history, the Chelsea had housed a trickle of kooks and eccentrics like Andy Warhol's leading lady of film, Viva, who moved in in 1963 and never left; the most notorious couple to stay there was undoubtedly rock star Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols and his girl friend, Nancy Spungen, who he stabbed to death in their suite in 1978. Composer Virgil Thompson had a sumptuous apartment there, and playwright Arthur Miller lived there for a number of years, calling his stay "a ceaseless party."

The lobby was a testament to Stanley Bard's good will and blind trust, for the walls were covered with art work of varying quality that he accepted in lieu of rent during rough times. In one corner of it Annie Hamburger set up her temporary cardtable box office, amid couches of dubious origin and amoeba-shaped coffee tables that only a struggling resident sculptor could have devised. The first evening, of a two-part series entitled AT THE CHELSEA, went comparatively smoothly: there were three separate performances in as many tiny rooms, with each being done three times to accommodate the audience that had been divided into three units and saw them in rotation. The crazy-quilt layout of the hallways and random numbering on doors made finding the appointed locations on a par with that of the proverbial needle in a haystack; and once we did, it was necessary to stand three deep up against the walls to allow enough space for the performers to move around.

In 502, THE ROOM, written and performed by David Van Tieghem and Tina Dudek, was under way. Based loosely on a play, LEGEND OF SARAH, by James Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau, it depicted a lovers' quarrel in choreographed movement (by Dudek) to percussive rhythms that Van Tieghem improvised by beating drumsticks on various objects—lamps, table, fireplace mantle, chests—that he came across in passing. Both seasoned professionals, they worked up a heated amount of frenzy in the (mercifully) short time allotted them, before we were herded out and down to Room 302.

There, the expatriate Hungarian troupe called Squat Theater, launched into what was billed as a "post-modern" rehash of the television classic, "Little House on the Prairie." The action there took place around a central crib lined with hay where the afore-mentioned goat chomped contentedly. The action that followed was so ludicrous it doesn't bear describing, except that we did learn that the goat was playing the part of the youngest sister, and it was her older sib who lolled about on the nearby unmade bed like a petulant Lolita. This show had already been performed once and, without a window open even a crack for ventilation, by the time our crowd was ready to depart, the air was infused with a gamy redolence.

Staggering down the hall to Room 322, we entered on a scene directly from the Chelsea's checkered past: a re-enactment of the night Sid did Nancy in in 1978. It was titled, "PENNY ARCADE AS...Nancy Spungen, OR...Edie Sedgwick, with, as Sid Vicious...Stephen Wastell." Penny Arcade was the big draw of the evening. She's been plying her trade all over the East and West Village for years, sometimes under her real name, Susana Ventura; her trade being improvisational solos drawn from actual people or events. She and Wastell, a British actor, had by then done two shows and looked as tired and rumpled as the bed that was their stage. As titillated and voyeuristic as it made us feel, their re-enactment didn't come close to the real incident that had made world-wide tabloid headlines. Nothing could; except maybe the blood-drenched pillows.

That set of performances was scheduled to be repeated for ten consecutive evenings, to be followed, from January 26 to February 5, 1989, by the second set of three in different apartments. But that was not to happen. On the opening night of the second series, Hamburger met us all in the Chelsea lobby with a confession

to make: the New York City Fire Department had waited until that afternoon to inform her that she and her ticket holders would be allowed no further than the lobby. Everything done previously had been in blatant violation of the code, and someone downtown had screwed up in allowing her the original permit. True to fashion, however, she'd recovered from that blow to the solar plexus in time to ferret out a large loft space a few blocks south and west, where her staff was setting up folding chairs that very minute. The three neat groupings of spectators became a disgruntled herd that was led en masse to the new setting and forced to take whatever places they could grab. I was lucky to cop a front-row seat, but most behind me could see nothing of the ensuing acts since the space was deep but unraked. That was a pity, because the first one was a corker.

Before we'd arrived a double bed had been set up in one corner of the performing area, looking much like any other except that instead of the usual mattress and coverings, a great mound of dirt had been molded within a framework of boards on top of the base, smoothed across the surface and tucked under carefully shaped plump dirt pillows. That, and a nearby dresser were the only props. It took the crowd some time to settle down, but even when it did, there was no action to engage it up front. The playbill listed the first act as EMBEDDED, and some of us began to think that was all there was to it—a simulated bed, end of show. Big deal. But just as mutters rose and fell and legs crossed and uncrossed, we saw a tiny crack appear on the center of the mound. To titters and audible oh-my-gods, a human fingertip emerged, then slowly and methodically, an entire scantily clad female form. She rolled over, sat up and scraped the dirt particles from her; her head, with blonde hair amazingly unmussed, had broken through the cleavage between the "pillows." She got out of bed and stepped behind the dresser. *That* was the end of the act, which had taken about thirty-five minutes and kept us all riveted. The performer was Ann Carlson, also a fixture on the Performance Art circuit, whom I considered one of the best of the genre, and the creator of one of the most unforgettable routines described more fully in the next chapter.

The second spot on the program was entitled A WAY WITH WORDS: JOHN KELLY AS DAGMAR SINGING LIKE JONI MITCHELL. He'd been "doing" Mitchell for some time; an early inspiration—he recalled, "I thought she was a genius. I listened to her all through high school. The fact that she's a pop artist diminishes her credential...in certain people's eyes, (but) she's a poet and she put it to music"—she may have attracted him because, like other subjects he was drawn to, such as Orpheus, Schiele, and later Robert Schumann, her career peaked early. Born Roberta Joan Anderson in 1943 in Saskatchewan, Canada, she married Chuck Mitchell in 1965 and performed with him in coffee houses and folk clubs, (she played guitar, piano and dulcimer). When they divorced in 1967, she moved to New York to begin a clothing design career (she was also an accomplished painter), supporting herself by performing on the East Coast folk circuit, using her own material. Tall, flaxen-haired, and a superb musician, her distinctive voice and delivery soon made her a big star. Some of her best-remembered hits were "Chelsea Morning," "Woodstock" and "Both Sides Now."

This was the first time, however, that Kelly was "doing" her in other than a club setting, and the fact that he had to use the dirt bed to perform on was a decided disadvantage. He looked like her, in a long skinny dress and straight blonde wig down to the chest. But his vocal imitation was not very convincing and he seemed ill at ease. The biggest kick I got out of it was that the two women beside me had never seen a drag act before, and they couldn't hold back giggles.

Kelly remembered that gig with a shudder. He, Carlson, and Frank Maya, the third and final act of the evening, who was a New-Age stand-up comic (and one-time roommate of John Jesurun) whose piece consisted of reading supposed letters from dead stars who once may have crossed the Chelsea's threshold, and wasn't very funny, never had the chance to perform inside the hotel as the earlier actors had, and were partly unaware of the reasons for switching venues. "That stupid loft we had to do it in," Kelly said, appalled. "That I don't understand." But the decision to do Dagmar as Mitchell was a carefully preconceived decision: "Doing Dagmar as Joni Mitchell made it slightly more arty instead of drag queeny - more esoteric, more performance-art-y. It could have been used with other characterizations, like Dagmar as Mr. Butch from Teaneck,

New Jersey (laughter). It's, like, once removed."

The audience at that performance was not very receptive to the piece (nor to Maya's later, with many defections before it was over). Where previously, at La MaMa, say, they would break into applause and shouts of "Brava" all through the show, these people sat on their hands for the most part. I liked to think it was as much the fault of circumstances and terrible visibility as the material itself. But it didn't phase Kelly. He was no stranger to hostile and unreceptive audiences.

"In Caracas one time I did a solo show and they booed in the end (it was half boos, half bravos, actually). But really loud. I think they were expecting a dance piece. They seemed, like, a stupid trashing audience. Yes, you can feel the hostility. I don't get depressed by that. But I can get really defensive if people bug me—really defensive and angry. I want to have it out with them. I want to find out why they are doing it. And then there are some European audiences that think they know everything. They're better than you. You're shit and you're an American. 'You couldn't possibly know about our culture.' You...get that. But I got the most hostile from Montreal. BLUTWURST. Snide people that worked for the festival...like, in this press conference, this guy—I think John Jesurun was there—this guy was trying to bait me, make me out to be a jerk and a dillennante. And I wouldn't let him have it I was as smart as he was, or whatever. And he gave me a scathingly bad review which I've never even read (in French). And audiences just didn't come after that. But then the next day there was this great review in another paper, and...But there was that kind of hostility, and it was the fact that I was an American. And they were STUPID up there—and shallow so that was kind of disappointing. One day in Toronto I'd get a great review. The next day a horrible review in a rival paper, with a lot of inaccuracies."

He paused, thinking back a moment, then shrugged. "So, basically, I've stopped reading reviews. Meredith Monk doesn't read reviews. Billy Forsyth doesn't. I've talked to them all about it. It's the only way you can have power over it, is to not read them. Oh, I'm aware that things are written about me. I save everything. I'm going to write a book someday."

The performance Kelly mentioned being so loudly booed for in Caracas, Venezuela, was BORN WITH THE MOON IN CANCER, which was presented at 11 Festival De Caracas 1990, and also at Ilk Festival Ibero Americana in Bogota, Columbia, after first touring to Dance Place, Washington, D.C. and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He had performed a truncated version of it in 1988 on a double bill with PASS THE BLUTWURST, BITTE, at the Aspen Dance Festival, Aspen, Colorado, and at Reggio Emilia in Italy, as noted briefly in the section on BLUTWURST. It was essentially a revamp of some earlier themes with a few new twists, singing opera arias and acting out highly romanticized characterizations in a broad emotional reflection on love, death, and the sometimes contradictory abundances of life.

Kelly entered the stage blindfolded, to a background of Verdi's choral prelude "D'Amor Sull All Rosee" from II Trovatore. He began singing in a soft baritone that rose in pitch dramatically with the music, until he was in his now-famous counter-tenor/mezzo-soprano range. His movements became more expressive and balletic as he acted out the story line of a Byronesque young man lost in his emotions. So that things wouldn't appear to be getting too stickily romantic, he segued into a tragic love song by Pergolesi and, at the same time, pulled out his ubiquitous stuffed chicken to serenade, milking the effect to its fullest, before discarding it as another dead prop, laying it on its side and shrouding it with a handkerchief. He then left the stage.

He returned dressed in his silver lamè space suit, as if to go into a hard rock number (echoes of ODE TO A CUBE) and after a few obligatory writhings to the sound of smashing glass, surprised everyone (but me) with a straight-on rendition of the "Habanera" from *Carmen*. Without skipping a beat or losing the thread, he then slid into a center-stage chair and went into something melancholy by Gustav Mahler. Sitting stiffly upright, he turned up flash cards from his lap with English translations of each phrase as he sang it. The finale was a tenderly performed love aria from Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, about old vows retrieved. It was sung with quiet emotion until the climax, when it was expected to be the most forceful and loud. Instead,

Kelly let his voice trail off and stop, as if he were so overcome by the music he couldn't finish. The stage lights faded to the sounds of only the orchestra and the last glimpse we got showed a thin gaunt figure apparently coming to terms with himself at long last, and steeling for what lay ahead.

The plot of BORN WITH THE MOON IN CANCER reflected John Kelly's own experience, as all his work did. "I'd been living in New York," he revealed. "Been doing my share of debauchery—smoking, drinking, etc. I contracted double pneumonia and had to return to my parents' home to recover. This piece is about a guy who goes to the big city, gets wasted, and has to go home again, and then goes back...to the city, but grown up a bit in the process."

BORN was, in all respects, a solo concert, and relied heavily on Kelly's vocal abilities. He had been studying voice with Peter Elkus, Frederica von Stade's coach, and the results were gratifying—sharper focus, stronger and more precise attack, and less vibrato in long sustained passages. He had always been a good dancer. Now he was becoming a competent, instead of merely freakish singer also.

His "newly found voice" was put to good advantage in his major work created in the Fall of 1990, LOVE OF A POET, based loosely on the life and loves of the German composer Robert Schumann, and sung mainly to his "*Dichterliebe*" cycle, with added segments of "*Liederkreis*" and the "*Kinderszenen*" piano cycle. The art of lieder had been sadly neglected in recent years, especially in recital halls. So it was considered adventurous and unexpected for an avant-garde artist to employ the romantic, at times schmaltzy genre in a performance piece set in the most unlikely (but highly effective) place imaginable: the Battery Maritime Building, otherwise known as the Manhattan Terminal of the Staten Island ferry. On the second floor, Huck Snyder, with the help of Madderlake, the posh Upper East Side florist known until then mainly for socialite weddings and gala settings, cleverly concealed—or revealed—the vast institutional-green expanse of girders and beams with swirls of grapevines linking the strict geometry of the overhead structure with soft satin draperies that fell from it to the floor. Through large apertures in the back wall was a breathtaking panoramic view of tug-boats and ferries plying the night waters of New York Harbor. Annie Hamburger couldn't have found a better site-specific environment for a piece about an early nineteenth century romantic.

The beams, leafless vines, and draperies loosely defined a bed chamber that included a piano, bed, writing desk, small crystal chandelier, and such seemingly unconnected objects as a two-story ladder, zinc washtub, and small grey casket (containing a radio). A large bucket of autumn flowers and a mound of dirt sketched in a "garden" area behind the draperies. The rhythmic slapping of water against the pilings far below set a gentle metronomic cadence to the evening. Fernando Torm-Tohá, the show's musical director and accompanist, was the only other performer on stage besides Kelly. He sat at the piano, affecting the indifferent air of a hack musician hired by the hour. At one time he could be seen casually munching a piece of fruit, at others lighting candles to read his music by, teasing his sea-urchin platinum hairdo, or yawning widely as he awaited his next intro—all in stark contrast to Kelly's wildly animated poet.

At the beginning of the piece, Kelly/Poet lay asleep on his satin-sheeted bed, while on the drapery behind him was shown a black-and-white film of his dream. In it he was pursuing a young woman with a parasol through the woods. Next he was sitting near her on a park bench. Staring straight ahead, she took a silver ball from her purse and let it roll toward him. He did likewise with another ball. The scene was meant to symbolize Schumann's five-year wooing of the teenage Clara Wieck, a piano prodigy whose father did everything possible to prevent their marriage. (Schumann wrote the "*Dichterliebe*" in 1840, just before they blissfully wed. But his happiness was short-lived. He suffered intense depressions and feeble health for the ensuing fifteen years, at one time attempting to commit suicide by leaping into the Rhine River, and died in an asylum at the age of forty-six.) After the film, artfully shot by Anthony Chase, the lights brightened, Torm-Tohá played as Kelly moved fitfully on the bed and woke up, singing "Im wunderschönen monat Mai". On the drapery above flashed the English equivalent of each line as it was sung, excellently translated by *Village Voice* theater critic Michael Feingold. It was all about love's awakening, but he could find no happiness

in it, and continued to beg for her reply with teardrops that turned into flowers (“Ausmeinen Tränen”).

Kelly went to the desk, sat down, and tried to write a love letter. But the pen kept flying up in his hand, as if the words were escaping the page. From appearing simply love-sick, Kelly’s Poet became ever-increasingly agitated in gesture and voice and looked bent on getting rid of himself for good. It was then that Kelly moved from the “room” into the “garden”. After experiencing a religious vision (“Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome”) he stepped into the washtub full of water and then waded through the pile of dirt, petitioning the image of the Virgin, whose face was that of his beloved Clara, with arms outstretched. He was clearly deranged, staring wide-eyed ahead, and climbed the ladder on the wrong side, only to strike his head at the top on a gold picture frame. There he sang “In der Fremde”, about being left alone and friendless in a barren land he couldn’t recognize. He then saw the dirt mound as a grave and knelt down at it, pulling a pair of long shears from its depth, which he held up like a dagger. He dashed to the door with it in his hand, tore off his nightshirt, and ran naked off stage.

A film sequence followed—a gruesome overview of rows of half-buried dead bodies. Then Kelly returned, dressed, but with his hair cut short and in his hand strands of his shorn locks (symbolic decapitation?), which he strew about the floor. He went again to the washtub and this time stuck his head and shoulders into the water. He let it drip down over him for a moment. Then, just as Torm-Tohá played ‘Der Dichter Spricht’ from ‘*Kinderszenen*’, Kelly dived into the mound of dirt that had earlier served as a grave, and sang the rest of the cycle covered with the resulting mud. Near the end, his worst demons partially under control, Kelly sat again at the desk, the prototype of a stolid German gentleman once more, carefully slicing a coffee cake and fastidiously popping bits of it into his mouth as the stage darkened for the last time. Our eyes were drawn immediately to the fluid scene beyond the windows. Lights from the harbor craft scribbled freehand sketches of themselves in the water as they silently plied the blackness.

The night I attended, nature provided an added theatrical touch to the already surreal setting. A terrible storm blew up suddenly, lashing the windows with rain and filling the sky with lightning and thunder. The wind whistled ominously right through the cracks of the terminal walls, sending wet, cold air across our faces. For all its effectiveness, it might have been planned in advance. It heightened the right moments of the piece and dissipated just when the melancholy ending got under way, leaving ever-fainter grumblings as punctuations. The Poet that Kelly was portraying couldn’t have arranged a more evocative situation in his wildest dreams, nor set designer Huck Snyder in his versatility. But Kelly and Torm-Tohá, who might have been overwhelmed by the act of nature, took it in stride and went with it, letting it lend another eerie dimension to those they’d already carefully constructed.

As our conversation in his loft drew to a close, John and I discussed the romanticism so apparent in all his best work, including LOVE OF A POET. He said the only way to handle it was “to temper it with enough cynicism and enough darkness. Well, the darkness is already there. So that’s fine. So it’s just making it edgy, and that’s no problem for me, because that’s just the way I feel. It’s like light and dark; life is funny one minute, then totally tragic the next. The Romanticism that I see manifested in a schmaltzy retrograde way is stuff that is more mainstream theatrical. And I don’t think that’s real Romanticism, because I think the original Romantics were putting themselves out on the edge in a way—of madness, of nature.”

He slapped the back of a hand against his forehead in an exaggerated gesture of angst, laughed and stood up, saying he had to get back to sorting out costumes and props for an upcoming “Dagmar” tour. I told him it was hard to relate to the drag persona after sitting and talking with him for an hour or more; there had been no tell-tale obvious gestures or inflections in his everyday manner, and his speaking voice was well modulated and masculine. Now that he’d shown he could do so many other characterizations as well, if not better, and to such high visibility, hadn’t he—and the public—outgrown that narrow stereotype?

“Not at all,” he replied, helping me collect my paraphernalia. “I’ll probably have to suffer people calling me

a drag queen. I call MYSELF a drag queen, even though I know I'm also other things now. But [in this business] once you start doing drag, that's ALL everybody focuses on." Besides, I thought, it's not a bad steady income between inspirations. On the way to the door, he recited the next itinerary and what pieces he would be performing.

In the hallway, I noticed the walls were heavily stained from water leakage, and was reminded of my first Bank Street basement studio that at times became a virtual Niagara. "It only stains when it rains," he shrugged, like someone saying about a recent operation, "it only hurts when I laugh." I joked that it was reassuring there remained some constants in our unpredictable world of art, and bade him welcome to the club.

Back down on Sixth Avenue, I tried pinpointing the qualities that made John Kelly the important and appealing performer that he was, but got bogged down in a logjam of hackneyed superlatives. Several days later, however, while fingering through past reviews he'd handed me on leaving, I found them poignantly articulated in the words of Minneapolis critic Mike Steele (January 20, 1990), reviewing a performance of BORN WITH THE MOON IN CANCER at the Walker Art Center:

"He's an artist first, a transformer of emotions and creator of illusions, risking the ridiculous and the sentimental but always undercutting them....Why is he so fascinating, funny, touching? Partly because so few artists today risk all-out emotionalism. Kelly uses some of the most extreme diva roles in opera, not to portray women, but to transform himself into an illusion. He is an exposed human dealing nakedly with love, loss, death, depression and the role of the artist—the open vessel through which the extremes of life are channeled and transformed. As a lovely, delicate feminine voice emanates from him, the paradoxical nature of the performer emerges: multiple personalities, masculine and feminine, funny and sad, vulnerable and disguised. In the music, they all come together with unusual fullness to embrace the performer's own complexity, and he makes the audience care."

Not long afterward, Kelly sent me a note in an envelope bearing his rubber-stamped logo—a red line drawing of a young man, waist up, in striped pajamas with arms crossed behind his head against a pillow, eyes closed, and an enigmatic smile. It contained a handwritten update of his schedule, all printed in caps: "ALSO IN SAN FRANCISCO JUNE 9TH TO JULY 5TH TO PERFORM AT JOSIE'S JUICE BAR (CASTRO + MARKET)—PLANNING ON MAKING THE RECORDING [that we'd recently given him a grant for] THIS SUMMER. AM TAKING TRAPEZE LESSONS(!)

HOPE YOU ARE WELL—LOVE, JOHN"

Trapeze lessons? It would take at least one more adjective and a shake of the head to describe the guy: IRREPRESSIBLE!

Chapter Eleven

Show and Tell

ASIDE FROM THAT, MRS. LINCOLN,...

The unpredictability of live performance—and human nature—makes any night at the theater a dice game. For me that was always part of its draw; some of the funniest, saddest and most memorable mishaps were never written into the scripts, and probably why I began collecting examples of them in a special file headed: Humiliating Moments and Failed Aspirations.

The first recorded disaster occurred in 1964, when Arthur and I attended the New York opening night of a Spanish dance troupe featuring Antonio and his cousin Rosario. We'd seen them perform a few years earlier in Madrid, where they had superstar status, having danced together there since they were children in 1936, billed as Los Chevalillos Sevillanos—the kids from Seville. They were later featured in a Hollywood movie, “Ziegfield Girl” in 1940, and on Broadway in Olsen and Johnson’s SONS O’FUN, so were not complete strangers to American audiences.

On that ill-fated night, everything went wrong from the start. A passel of dark beauties began things off with an ensemble folk ballet, dressed in peasant blouses and full skirts with ornate over-aprons. Their feet were shod in flat black ballerina slippers with long laces that crisscrossed up their legs and were tied at the thighs. As they twirled in unison, snapping castanets, the lacing on one dancer’s leg slipped lower toward her ankle and then trailed dangerously behind her. It was stepped on almost immediately by another girl, tripping up the first, who went sprawling and took several others down with her, ending in a pile of starched flounces and rick-rack. The gypsy guitarists stopped playing in the background, and the curtain was lowered swiftly. The audience muttered menacingly.

Fifteen long minutes later the curtain rose to reveal Antonio in jet-splashed black trousers and bolero, and Rosario in a traditional red polka-dotted white gown with a long fishtail train. At the climax of their encircling dance, Antonio stepped on the train just as Rosario was about to make her disdainful exit. It ripped asunder and dragged along the floor after her. Antonio struck his forehead with one hand and the curtain came down again in a hurry.

The next sequence was a macho saber dance, performed by the young male members of the corps, decked out in tight pants and open-necked blouses and carrying mean-looking weapons that they clashed in simulated battle. Suddenly one of them missed a step and his saber struck another on the shoulder. The victim cried out in pain, dropped his weapon, and slapped the perpetrator across the face, before stalking off stage. There was total confusion. Down went the curtain. The audience was a boiling, sibilant cauldron.

After another eternity, during which many ticket-holders departed, Antonio appeared for his big solo number, this time wearing a baby blue matador’s “suit of lights.” He danced up onto a pile of fake boulders at the rear for a spectacular leap to the stage to start his heel-clicking routine. In mid-jump, his skin-tight knickers split right down the middle, from front to back, revealing a dancer’s belt and bare thighs. On landing, he whipped off the glittery jacket and improvised some bull-ring maneuvers, careful to keep it in front of any part of him exposed to the public as he turned, like a well-trained fan dancer. During one pirouette, an arm of the jacket dragged on the floor and he stomped on it. R-r-r-ip! Off it came. Disgusted and frustrated, Antonio tossed what was left across the stage and bounded into the wings. Curtain.

A management representative came onstage and announced that the evening’s performance would not continue, due to unforeseen circumstances, and that refunds could be obtained at the box-office in the morning. Have a nice day. Olé!

In the theater embarrassing moments don't discriminate; they befall the biggest stars and walk-ons, novices and seasoned veterans. The next one involved one of the latter. Katharine Hepburn was one of the most famous and respected personalities who ever appeared before the public and in film. Mention of her name conjured up her face, voice, idiosyncrasies and history to almost everyone. She was also revered for her precise professionalism, even in her dotage when she was afflicted with "the shakes." It was at a matinée performance on Thanksgiving eve, November, 1981. Wednesday afternoon performances, I was told once by Anne Meara, were known in the business as the "blue head specials," and I was engulfed in a sea of them, all bused in from the 'burbs. The play was a respectable but not very innovative star vehicle by Ernest Thompson called WEST SIDE WALTZ: audience-proof, critic-proof and guaranteed to keep the star's image intact.

Hepburn's co-star was Dorothy Loudon, whose name didn't have the same luster, but was becoming increasingly good box office. The two played aging retired former musicians—Hepburn a pianist, Loudon a violinist—who lived in a West Side Manhattan apartment complex for similar elderly virtuosi. They enjoyed practicing together (Loudon more than Hepburn), and during a pause in their playing in Act One, Loudon left the crook of the piano and walked to the door at the rear of center stage, saying "I think I hear someone at the door." When she grabbed the knob, however, she spun around and, interrupting Hepburn's next line, slapped her cheek and cried, "Oh, my god, we've skipped two whole ACTS!"

"Oh, dear, so we have," Hepburn gasped, her tremors intensifying.

Loudon rushed back and joined Hepburn on the piano bench, both backs to us, and they put their heads together, frantically whispering. Around me I heard the blue-heads whispering also: "Wait 'til I tell Viv back home..." "My bridge club will *never* believe this..." "Imagine. Hepburn, of all people..."

Hepburn and Loudon remained in a clinch, obviously discussing what to do. Their nodding and the audience's growing sibilance were halted by the sound of music emanating from the bowels of the piano—the piece they had just been playing. The let-down for the audience was audible. They'd been faking it all along to tapes! But it signalled a break in tensions for the actresses. Still hugging, their bodies began to shake uncontrollably, then muffled laughter filled the stage. The two were quite hysterical. So was the audience as raucous merriment spread to the balconies.

Hepburn finally got it together, extracted herself from the clinch, and approached the edge of the stage. Loudon, a mess, trailed after her, bent with laughter. The two of them stood facing us, arm in arm, casting furtive glances up at the boxes, as if they expected some vegetable-slinging. Hepburn advanced one step and, still holding her stomach, said "Obviously, we've made a mistake." The audience roared and Loudon disintegrated. Pointing to another door at stage right (it was Hepburn's apartment and she had earlier described the room beyond as the Rat's Nest, used only for storage since uncovering a nest of varmints there) Hepburn said, "I'll just see if I can rouse someone out there and get the curtain lowered."

She left Loudon in a puddle and strode across stage, opened it with some difficulty, and disappeared. Momentarily she was back with a surprised look on her face.

"You *won't* believe this," she said to us, (knowing full well that we *would*—we were already eating out of her hand), "They never noticed anything wrong back there. They're eating LUNCH!" She spoke loudly to be heard over the music that was still playing on uninterrupted. But immediately the curtain began to descend. You could picture a couple red-faced stagehands back there frantically pushing buttons with sandwiches stuffed in their mouths. When it reached chest height, the two actresses, who had stood silently hand in hand, stooped and stuck their faces out under the fringe. "We WILL be back," Hepburn promised, and the ladies who lunch broke into wild applause, knowing full well she meant it.

The buzz during the interval was unprecedented. Never had I seen a matinée crowd so agitated between acts before. A house representative appeared at the side of the stage and, after quieting everyone down, an-

nounced that, at Miss Hepburn's express wish, the play would be started all over again from the top, even if it conflicted with the times of the evening performance. We were thrilled and flattered. History was in the making.

The play progressed through two acts and into the third without further incident (or excitement). But when Loudon put down her violin on top of the piano, the house experienced collective *déjà vu*. She delivered the line, "I think I hear someone at the door," and voices everywhere said, "You do. You do." She ascended the steps and opened it. There stood the little janitor (David Margulies), blinking in wonderment at the applause that greeted his entrance. Hepburn and Loudon looked at each other, suppressed giggles, and carried on after the clapping subsided as if nothing had happened—pros to the core—finishing the play late, but in great style.

At the second curtain call—the reception had been tumultuous—Hepburn stepped forward and quieted us with her hands. She did a slow scan from the boxes nearest her, across the balconies, then down the length of the orchestra, until she had us all panting in anticipation.

"I just wanted to tell you that when I, as a young woman, first told my mother I had decided to make acting my career, she said to me, 'Katharine,' she said, 'be careful of the audiences. They are fickle. They will raise you up on a pedestal, and then they will devour you.' Well, I just want to inform my dear mother's memory that you have been one of the most incredible audiences I've ever had in all the years..." and her last words were lost in the roar that went up. The waves of love that washed back and forth across the footlights were palpable. It was like the last night of a revival meet. The crowd was on its feet making supplicating gestures it wouldn't have dreamed of normally. Dorothy Loudon melted again, this time in a pool of tears. It was almost too cruel, bringing down the curtain, finally, and forcing us out into the chill reality of a New York November. But, when you thought about it, it was an odd afternoon. All that energy expended, all that love expressed, all those tears shed for what? A mistake! Very odd indeed.

HOT AND COLD RUNNING

Not all the mishaps that befell theatrical productions during the years covered here were performer—or performance—generated. Some were the results of freak natural disasters, like the time the windows were blown in during a play at a storefront theater by the Hudson River as a hurricane-force gale swept up from the harbor, rattling the teeth of the Statue of Liberty and demolishing the cardboard shantytown perched on landfill that would eventually become Battery Park City. No one was injured. But, since the actors were barefoot, action had to be halted while broken glass and wood splinters were cleared from the playing area and the gaping holes covered with drapery. To me, however, the scariest aspect of attending productions in places not originally designed as theaters was the ever-present possibility of fire.

By the 1980s, strict regulations were in effect and stringently enforced so the danger was minimized. But before that, even though buildings' electrical standards were supposed to be up to code and routinely inspected, and new laws had been written about using and storing volatile materials (like oil-painted backdrops and props), overloading and overcrowding of facilities was widespread. Spontaneous combustion was a term better used to describe the exciting results of collaborative stage efforts than an explanation of what might physically destroy that stage and endanger the lives around it through carelessness or neglect. Sometimes you were never sure which it would be until you got there, as evidenced by the night I arrived to attend a performance at a dilapidated East Fourteenth Street loft building early in 1980, only to discover the entrance blocked by firemen and police. The fire was raging somewhere in the back, apparently, but sent acrid smoke spewing up the stairwell to the second floor where the theater company resided, making access—or any chance of seeing the production that night—impossible. Luckily, none of the actors had arrived yet, so all that was lost were smoke-damaged costumes and some props.

Those smoke-damaged costumes entailed more than just brocade fabrics, lace and fringes. The company's

claim to fame rested, not in its acting (if anything it made the Jean Cocteau Repertory look like the Royal Shakespeare by comparison), nor the plays its director created from classic European novels that never seemed to end, but in a clever innovation hit upon by its scenic and costume designer: making fin-de-siecle gowns from plastic trash bags—yes, trash bags! The designs, in photographs, were ingenious in their draped authenticity. The only problem with them was in performance: two lovers going into a clinch sounded like distant icebergs breaking up; a street scene with many pedestrians in wide skirts rivaled sanitation trucks sweeping gutters; and when the actors swirled about in a ballroom episode, it was as if Central Park trees had shed all their leaves and every school kid in New York was shuffling home through them. It was the kind of art you had to *hear* to believe. On my way home that night, I envisioned a surrealistic fashion showroom strewn with partly melted Worth gowns, antebellum hoop skirts and turn-of-the-century elaborate hats with floral decorations turned into molten lava. But I was grateful nobody had been there at the time.

On the subject of fire, I was adamant about not encountering it at performances in any form that seemed threatening. Exceptions were the works of Robert Wilson (where, in *EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH*, for example, at the Metropolitan Opera House, he had a couple strolling arm-in-arm across the stage in nineteenth century costume, the woman's gloved hand casually holding a burning newspaper), and Peter Brook, (whose adaptation of Jean-Claude Carrière's *THE MAHABHARATA* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theater in 1987, based on India's ancient national epic—at nearly twelve-thousand pages, it is fifteen times the size of the Bible—contained isolated areas where fires were supposed to “break out and devastate” the landscape during the culminating battle between two groups of cousins, the Pandavas and Kauravas, to determine which would rule the earth [a two-evening, Wilsonian affair with each segment lasting upwards of five hours] and, in the process, create the myths, religion, history, and thought of the country). Both *auteurs* pieces were performed in very large areas with audiences well out of the range of leaping tongues of fire, even when they shifted unpredictably. But such was not the case when seeing performances in the claustrophobic environments of tiny experimental theater spaces, like that of SQUAT.

SQUAT Theatre was formed in Budapest, Hungary in the repressed days of 1969. In 1972 Communist culture authorities prohibited public appearances of the troupe, which then was producing highly political satires critical to the current regime. (Even when I visited Budapest in the mid-1980s, performances by such groups were forbidden, although I recall passing a theater box office one dreary rainy afternoon—that city was not a lovely place in the best of weather—and noting a poster announcing several one-act plays by Edward Albee in translation, signalling a slight tug upward of the Red Curtain.) As with Václav Havel's plays in Czechoslovakia in the same era (Chapter 1), SQUAT's had to be performed in the private quarters of sympathetic comrades. In 1974 a “theater house” was even built within one apartment for it.

The company fled to France in 1976, and subsequently appeared in London, Dusseldorf and Amsterdam (at the renowned world center for experimental activists, the Mickery Workshop, where so many artists had been given free reign to create, including Robbie Anton). It was while in Holland that it created its first full-length piece, *PIG, CHILD, FIRE!*, first performed in Rotterdam. From almost the start, then, fire was important to the SQUAT esthetic, and when the troupe immigrated to New York the same year, it was already its signature symbol, integrated in one form or other into every piece it performed.

SQUAT hit the jaded New York scene like a shot of adrenalin. *The Village Voice* reviewers tripped over each other with gushes of praise, and *PIG, CHILD, FIRE!* was awarded a 1978 Obie for Best New Play, in spite of the fact (or because of it) that much of it was incomprehensible, obscure, and, for all its “modernity,” strangely arcane. With the help of George Ashley of Performing Artservices, its members were able to obtain a permanent home base at 256 West Twenty-third Street, in a building several stories high with a large plate glass front on the street level. Future works utilized that space and another second-floor room, whose main feature (I remember only too well) was a steel door leading to a fire escape.

It was in that upper chamber during a performance of the company's next play, *ANDY WARHOL'S LAST*

LOVE, that I realized I was never going to be able to sit through an entire evening of its work. Not with my pyrophobia. I had walked out on PIG, CHILD, FIRE! when a fire was ritualistically lit part way along, but I was not yet aware of its presence in every subsequent piece. The play started off auspiciously enough in the storefront area. The audience was banked on bleachers at the back, facing the street. The scene's action, involving a very obese buddha-like nude performer and several actors in Andy Warhol look-alike rubber head masks (that was the only thing that I could tell had anything to do with the artist), was played out before the window in order to attract passersby and incorporate their startled reactions into the semi-improvisational plot, whatever it was.

We were then led up the stairs to a room half occupied by a carpeted platform for audience seating. The other half was the "stage," delineated only by a laid down row of bricks, and containing a kitchen table, chairs and cabinet. The steel door marked EXIT in red was at the far end of the room. After we were all seated, a figure of no discernible gender in formless garb entered from the doorway and, after breaking up some of the furniture wordlessly—most early SQUAT pieces had little or no dialogue—went to the cabinet, opened it, and removed the parts of an asbestos suit, and began donning them. When the "booties" and "helmet" were in place, the actor reached under the table for a three-foot-in-diameter pan containing sand. The splintered furniture chards were stacked on it and doused with a flammable liquid. By the time the pyromaniac extracted an acetylene torch from a shelf and lowered the helmet's face guard, I was off and running for the exit, accompanied by a few other skeptics. Luckily it was June and warm, so no sudden rushes of cold air blew inward when we opened the door and stepped out onto the fire escape. Before the door closed automatically, we caught a glimpse of the bonfire within that was almost to the ceiling.

I didn't attend another SQUAT performance until the one presented by Anne Hanburger at the Chelsea Hotel, described earlier, with the goat. She'd promised it wouldn't even contain the lighting of a cigarette, and it didn't. But meanwhile I hadn't seen enough of SQUAT's work to consider funding it, although it garnered another Obie in 1982 for Best American Play (now that the troupe was "naturalized") with MR. DEAD AND MR. FREE.

My fear of fire was not unfounded. Twice during a ten-year period it ravaged sections of my studio apartment, once when flames escaped a crumbling furnace chimney, and again when a plumber, fixing a pipe, accidentally struck an ancient gas jet, which exploded and gutted the bathroom.

Heat is a related, if less scary subject, and its overabundance or lack affected almost all the little theater spaces that were in business year-round, since they incorporated forced hot air in winter and air-cooling devices in warm weather, neither operating properly. So some unrehearsed temperature extremes affected the audiences enough to alter perceptions—and reactions.

In June 1976, THE ARCHITECT AND THE EMPEROR OF ASSYRIA, a bitingly satirical play by Spain's foremost (but rejected) contemporary playwright Fernando Arrabal, opened at the La MaMa Annex. The production, ably staged by Tom (HAIR) O'Horgan, properly emphasized the playwright's brutal concepts along with his penchant for scatology. The story involved two characters—and one octopus. The "Emperor" arrived from the sky, sliding down a rope, dressed nattily in white suit and panama hat, the apparent essence of the civilized gentleman. He landed in a desolate mountain area of an exotic island, where he encountered a "Savage" whom he called the "Architect." Dressed only in a loincloth, but with the power to command mountains, trees and animals to his bidding, the savage was not content unless he could learn to speak the Emperor's language. On the other hand, the Emperor found that, in spite of his knowledge of the arts and sciences, he longed for the savage state the Architect enjoyed. In the end, the Architect cannibalized the Emperor, donned his clothing, and the opening scene was replayed, but this time with the Architect descending from the sky confronting a now-savage Emperor. Arrabal seemed to be indicating here that there must always be the "ruler" and the "builder" to represent the human condition on its creative level.

Now to the octopus and heat. That June was unseasonably warm. The La MaMa Annex had only recently

had an air cooling system installed, but it hadn't yet passed Fire Department inspection, so Ellen Stewart didn't want to chance operating it. Unfortunately, there was no way to dissipate the accumulating heat inside—no windows or doors large enough to be opened. By the night I got to see the show, men in the audience were down to their undershirts and women were picking soaked summer frocks from their bodies, in part because everyone was forced to the upper balcony to view the proceedings, that took up all the downstairs space, and they were all hanging over the railing gasping for air. O'Horgan recalled, "It got terribly hot inside. It was more like going for a cure than a performance."

He had bought a real octopus to be used in that penultimate cannibal scene and it turned out to be more effective than he ever imagined. The play had been on for five days or so before I saw it, and during that time the heat wave not only continued, it intensified. At the first performances, O'Horgan liked the faintly fishy smell the eight-armed sucker emitted. But, as time went on and the temperature rose, it began getting out of hand. He desperately tried everything from washing it thoroughly before each show to spraying it with a very strong deodorant he'd seen advertised on TV that was supposed to get rid of the most stubborn odors. Nothing worked. In fact, the spray only made things worse. The creature reacted by giving off a double dose of its essence. You could see the actors holding it as far away from their bodies as possible, and reeling after each close encounter. For us in the musicians' gallery the smell was pervasive and sickening. Someone near me, reaching for a handkerchief to cover his nose, muttered it was like being locked in an airtight latrine with backed-up plumbing. I said it was like a garage full of Sanitation Department trucks that had just picked up around the Fulton Fish Market. Ellen Stewart swore that every time afterwards when anything playing that space wasn't going well—or the heat grew too intense—she detected a whiff of the mollusk's revenge.

The second example of temperature extremes affecting performances was the opposite condition of that at the La MaMa Annex. It involved the complete breakdown of a heater on a night when the thermometers outside plummeted to the teens, the roads and sidewalks iced over, and the vent over the outer door of the already drafty uninsulated storefront theater we were in, froze open and wouldn't close. It was the 10th of February 1989. The place was called The House of Candles because that was the name painted above the store when the Independent Theatre Company took it over. (I admit I'd initially been attracted to it several months before, not by reputation, but because of the romantic implications of the sign.) It was located at 99 Stanton Street, one block below Houston Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side—a desultory dead end road that led, as they said, from Hong Kong to San Juan. Originally part of Chinatown, the shops along it were still run by Chinese merchants. But the street life was all Puerto Rican: swarthy men tinkering endlessly with their cars; their women leaning against buildings in lurid sweaters, gossiping and screaming at the toddlers running circles around them all. In cold weather like that night, they were still there on the street, the men in padded jackets and the women and kids bundled up and crammed inside the vehicles, laughing and shouting and banging on the horns.

Independent Theatre Company was founded in 1986 under the leadership of Barbara Schofield as a kind of intellectual stepchild of the Jean Cocteau Repertory Company. The Cocteau originator and director, Eve Adamson even served on its board of Advisors, and freely loaned sets and costumes to the new troupe for its initial productions. The point of the Independent Theatre was to provide "a venue for outstanding theatre, music, and dance of a difficult, nonrealistic, abstract, and presentational nature."

In this, their first season, the members had already presented works by Ionesco, Pinter, Buchner, Shakespeare, Genet, and were presently engaged in an ambitious staging of JEST, SATIRE, IRONY AND DEEPER SIGNIFICANCE by Christian Dietrich Grabbe, a nineteenth century German playwright whose short unhappy life was marked by mental and physical suffering and self-isolation. He was born in Detmold in 1801 and died there thirty five years later. Titled SCHERZ, SATIRE, IRONIE, UND TIEFERE in German, it was a satire in the vein of Italian *commedia dell'arte* and German Shrovetide carnival farces; full of blackouts, obvious buffoonery, aborted kidnapping, and consorting with the devil, the play was meant to ridicule Romanti-

cism by employing its own silly contrivances, and the staging was full of mad choreography, which the ten actors, doubling in roles, carried off with aplomb. The only problem was, nearing intermission, the theater grew suddenly very cold. Several people, shuddering, pulled on their coats and made quiet exits. I had my own coat on by then, with the hood up. But the tops of my legs and feet began to go numb. When we started seeing the performers' breath, we knew something was amiss. At the interval there were only six left in the audience, and a spokesman confessed that the heater in the vestibule—the theater's only source of warmth—had just konked out. We stomped up and down the aisles to keep blood circulating in our limbs while the more mechanically-minded players fiddled with the contraption. Someone taped a pillowcase over the errant door vent; others scrambled to make coffee and cocoa on a double hot plate. The group's production director, Anne DeMare, who was also the play's director, enlisted two actors to accompany her backstage. They rummaged about and returned with two plug-in electric space heaters that were tested and found working. They dusted them off and positioned them in front of the seats in the first row right of center aisle. She went backstage again and came back with a stack of painted canvas drops that she and the others unfolded and shook out. The remaining six of us were invited to occupy those seats, snuggling up before one of the heaters. The other was directed at the playing area. We complied, hot mugs warming our fingers, and when we were in place, the canvas sheets were draped across our chests, right up to the chin, barbershop style. Folding chairs in front of us kept the sheets above the heaters, and another canvas panel was spread from the folding chairs to the floor, creating a cozy enclosed tepee with our heads as the protruding center poles. Behind us, more cloths were spread across our backs and necks, forming a long stiff collar against the Arctic air that still managed to seep in around the pillowcased vent.

Snug as bugs, we were ready for the resumption of the show. But the performers, some of whom had been in flimsy costumes, first had to pile on extra clothing to make it through the evening. The second act commenced and soon regained the pace of the first, with perhaps slightly heightened histrionics and more energetic self-flagellation. The puffs of breath the actors emitted were like comic-book dialogue balloons and entirely in keeping. I have long since forgotten whether or not the play was worth all the bother, but I remember that no one gave a second thought to cancelling the performance. It wasn't even considered.

GOOD, BAD, 'N' DIFFERENT

In the course of a quarter century of consecutive theatergoing and after thousands of performances, it might seem an impossibility to be able to single out the one best and one worst Off Broadway show during that time, but I had no hesitation doing so. The plays were both by authors I never met personally nor had any foundation dealings with, except indirectly by sponsoring the companies that mounted the works. Both were inconsistent craftsmen, meaning the one who created the best play was capable of turning out embarrassing drivel, and the other at times wrote some meaningful social satire. Even so, I couldn't get enough of the former's output, while the latter's work I found obvious and tiresome. The best play was *ON THE VERGE, OR THE GEOGRAPHY OF YEARNING* by Eric Overmyer. The worst was *THE FLATULIST* by Murray Schisgal. There were scores of others that come close in both categories—one near-best was *LIMBO TALES* by Len Jenkin and will get a few paragraphs later—but those two, for me, formed the opposite extremities of the beast.

GOOD

ON THE VERGE, OR THE GEOGRAPHY OF YEARNING, Eric Overmyer's second play, and what dramaturg James Magruder hailed as "one of the most important new works to emerge in drama in the last thirty years," was developed in that durable hotbed of experimental excitement, Baltimore's Center Stage, beginning in January 1985. Its New York debut was at the John Houseman Theatre on Theater Row, Forty-second

Street, in March 1987. In the intervening years a score of regional productions of it were presented across the country, in such diverse places as Hartford, Minneapolis, Boston, San Diego, Syracuse, Chicago, Seattle, and Dallas. (Sadly, though, for all its popularity, Overmyer seldom realized more than a few thousand dollars a year in royalties from it—a commentary of sorts on the plight of the contemporary Off Broadway playwright in America.)

Overmyer was one of only a handful of playwrights (Mac Wellman and John Jesurun are others that come to mind immediately) for whom language was both entity and inspiration. *ON THE VERGE* was a linguistic journey across time and through space. The plot involves three audacious Victorian ladies—Alex (Alexandra), Fanny, and Mary—who set out in 1888 with hiking gear (in wicker backpacks), machetes, and pith helmets to explore the unknown. They climb mountains, cross desert wastes, slash their way through jungles, ford rivers, all the while talking endlessly, creating their own accompanying verbal vistas. But increasingly they encounter more and more unfamiliar phrases and objects that they learn belong to the future—like mud-wrestling, no-fault insurance, tax shelters, Cool Whip, Burma Shave, eggbeaters, “I Like Ike” buttons, and side-view mirrors—and find themselves on a route that leads into twentieth century middle-American pop culture.

“I have seen the future,” says one of the intrepid trio, paraphrasing a famous Snoopy line in Shultz’s comic strip “Peanuts,” “and it is slang.”

They wind up in the Midwest of 1955 and stay awhile, fascinated by modern mores. They hang out in a raucous night club, drink booze, and dance newfangled steps to unaccustomed but exhilarating music. Fanny and Alex elect to remain, leaving only Mary to continue the adventure into the future alone, eggbeater and other artifacts of the journey dangling like headhunter’s trophies from her pack.

The idea for the play came from two books Overmyer stumbled upon about female Victorian travelers, one titled “A Long Desire” by Evan S. Connell, the other, “Victorian Lady Travelers” by Dorothy Middleton.

“I had never heard of them,” he admitted. “They sounded weird and fabulous.”

As noted, the first sketch for the play was presented at the Center Stage under the direction of Jackson Phippen. But the full New York presentation was by the alumni of John Houseman’s The Acting Company, directed by Garland Wright, artistic director of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis (in the theater newly named in Houseman’s honor). At the time The Acting Company was the country’s only permanent professional repertory theater company touring nationwide. Founded in 1972 by Houseman and Margot Harley, its purpose was twofold: to develop young acting talent by performing a repertory of classical and contemporary plays, and to take the highest quality productions possible to cities and small towns all over America. The three dauntless explorers in *ON THE VERGE* were played by Lisa Baines, Laura Hicks, and Patricia Hodges. Tom Robbins was all the male characters that popped up throughout their travels, from a wickedly funny (un) savage, to a slithery lounge lizard, to a Liberace look-alike in the final nightclub setting, complete with pompadour and piano covered with miniature mirrors. The set, designed by John Arnone, was a versatile grid of poles that, staggered horizontally, could define mountain terrains; bunched together vertically, a jungle bamboo thicket; and spread flat, a desert expanse. Corresponding fluorescent tubes represented everything from rippling brooks to glitzy modem decor. The production, however, was never allowed to outshine the words which, in this case, formed acronyms, verbal exercises, puns, in dialogue replete with arcane information. “Sometimes I wish I could vacuum my brain,” Overmyer once said, “I’m an information junkie. But it’s wonderful to be able to use all this stuff, to vent it...”

The author’s production notes for *ON THE VERGE* included these explicit instructions: “The language of the play...cannot, must not, should not be naturalized or paraphrased. Rhythm and sound are sense.”

Eric Overmyer was born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1951, and raised in Seattle, Washington. His schooling included Reed College in Oregon, Florida State University, Brooklyn College, and CUNY. I first knew of him

when he became literary manager of Playwrights Horizons in 1981, a post he held until 1984, when he decided to settle down to writing his own plays full time. It didn't quite work out that way, at least not immediately. In 1985 he was hired as one of three story editors, who in turn worked with two chief writers and assorted freelance contributors, for the television series "St. Elsewhere." He stuck it out for three years, but found the medium too limiting, with "little room for creative or crazy stuff." When he got around to writing them, his own plays included the acclaimed *IN PERPETUITY THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSE*, *HAWKER*, *MI VIDA LOCA*, and *KAFKA'S RADIO*.

His self-description contained in the volume *Contemporary Dramatists* summed up my own reasons for classifying *ON THE VERGE* as the best contemporary play presented Off Broadway in the quarter-century covered here:

"I am interested in reversal instead of transition, in wrought language rather than humdrum speech, in leaps of the imagination not tedious exposition, in classic plays, and in contemporary plays which embody classical virtues and present classical challenges. I prefer to work with directors who direct classical plays as if they were contemporary, and contemporary plays as if they were classical. I am not an avant-gardist, I am a nouveau-classicist."

The plays of Len Jenkin, a native New Yorker born in 1941, were consistent favorites. His lonely, isolated characters spoke to me in a very personal way. They were all yearning for something outside themselves, in a quest for something uncertain but vaguely redemptive or transforming. As one of them says in *AMERICAN NOTES* (1988), "There are a lot of people who think their life is what happens to them. Get a job, get married, eat an ice cream cone. It's a great life. There's another kind of people who don't connect what happens to them with their lives at all. Their life is something else...hopefully." They are easy marks, therefore, for conmen, sideshow barkers, and salesmen peddling everything from encyclopedias to love potions to dreams. Eccentricity is their common trait, weird their aggregate adjective. They dream with eyes open and communicate directly with the audience in wryly self-mocking monologues.

GOGOL (1976), *DARK RIDE* (1981), *MY UNCLE SAM* (1984), *FIVE OF US* (1986), and *AMERICAN NOTES* are considered among his best works. But for me the 1980 production of the triptych *LIMBO TALES* at the Westbeth Theater Center had a magical completeness that ranked it very near *ON THE VERGE*. It may have been in part because the author directed it himself (as he did many of his plays); or that the set designer was the same as for *ON THE VERGE*, John Arnone (who had previously done another Jenkin production, *NEW JERUSALEM*, at the Public Theater in 1979, and won a Drama Desk nomination and an Obie Award for *K, IMPRESSIONS OF KAFKA'S THE TRIAL* in 1987 with Garland Wright, director of *ON THE VERGE*). It was certainly enhanced by the performances of the three fine actors who interpreted the lone roles in each section:

Bill Sadler	Part I-Highway
Ebbe Roe Smith	Part II-Intermezzo
Will Patton	Part III-Hotel

And it didn't hurt to have Norman Coates do the effective lighting and Susan Dennison the appropriate costuming.

The space at Westbeth was the kind I liked best—a cave-dark womb where everything starts from scratch. Jenkin must have shared my feelings, expressed earlier, about the glorious, expectant moment in the theater just as a performance begins, for he wrote, "I always like the opening: the houselights fade, the room goes black, the voices around me quiet, the first lights go up in the toybox, and the figures start to move." Then he added, "Once that's over, for something to hold me, as author or audience, there needs to be a continuing sense of wonder, as powerful as that in fairy tales, moonlight, or dreams." (*Contemporary Dramatists*). Part I—Highway began like that, in complete darkness. Then tiny lights appeared centerstage on what turned out

to be a miniature oval night landscape with a road circling the periphery, like the track of an electric train set. A little car with headlights on was advanced along it at intervals to show the progress of its driver's return to (or escape from) somewhere. The driver, the only live performer, spent most of the act at pay phones in the dim background, trying to assure whoever was on the other end that his arrival (or escape) was imminent.

It was the third episode that impressed most and was best remembered. The set contained three narrow doors in a row leading, supposedly, to rooms in a rundown hotel. Only the middle one was open, revealing a solitary salesman (Will Patton) sitting on a cot before a window with the blind drawn. "Starved, stalled, and stranded," he delivered a poignant, but not always comprehensible monologue directly to the audience. In the adjoining rooms (never opened) were loudspeakers emitting taped impressions. In one, a writer was heard typing away at what seemed to be his translation of a meaningless and probably phony mystic Oriental epic entitled "Kubla Khan." He was persistently interrupted by a salesman hawking lightning rods. In the other, a drug-addicted teenage girl rapped with visitors who ended up absconding with the last of her cash. The salesman in the central room, after some verbal meandering, decided he'd better move out of there before he was evicted. But before he did, he received an unsettling phone call from his dead father, then quoted a Biblical passage, "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

When he exited, all was still. Then the shadow of a bird in flight crossed the drawn windowshade and, after another pause, the mechanical tap-tapping of the typewriter resumed as the stage slowly went dark. As in all Jenkin's plays, the audience was left with the sense of man's undying hope for eventual liberation.

BAD

The work of Murray Schisgal, on the other hand—whose *THE FLATULIST* was the worst play I remembered seeing in a quarter century crammed with near-contenders—dealt with the inability of man to cope.

Born in Brooklyn in 1926, he was a late starter himself. After World War II he played saxophone and clarinet in jazz groups around New York City, then returned to college for a degree, and practiced law for several years. He even taught briefly. His first playwrighting success came when a pair of one-acters, *THE TYPISTS* and *THE TIGER* was presented in London in 1960 when he was on a self-searching trek through Europe, followed the next year by *DUCKS AND LOVERS*. *THE TYPISTS* and *THE TIGER* opened at the Orpheum Theatre in New York in 1963 when he was thirty-six. It won instant acclaim, brought him the year's Vernon Rice and Outer Circle Awards for best play, and starred the couple that would become most associated with his future work, Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson.

Alternately dubbed the Off Broadway rabbi or the poor man's Neil Simon, he dealt mainly with lower middle-class Jewish relationships and humor, as displayed in his greatest hit *LUV*, a play of manners, that opened at the Booth Theatre in 1964, again with Wallach, Jackson and Alan Arkin, directed by Mike Nichols. He and Dustin Hoffman were great friends, and Hoffman starred as the artist/hero in Schisgal's *JIMMY SHINE* in 1969 to some acclaim. So somebody thought he had something going for him. Not I. Nor television critic Harriet Van Home, who dug her nails into a 1966 ABC production of *THE LOVE SONG OF BARNEY KEMINSKI*: "In my long years....I have supped full of horrors, banalities, trivia, and all sorts of pretentious hokum. But rarely have the immature fantasies of a commonplace mind offended me so much."

Fortunately for Ms. Home, she didn't have to cover the 1980 production of *THE FLATULIST*, or her offenses would have to have been extended. It was a one-act on the bill with an equally tasteless morsel called *WALTER*. But, before going further, let's backtrack a bit to find out how I got to be involved with it in the first place.

In 1979 the actress Geraldine Page and her actor husband Rip Torn decided to create their own drama company, called Sanctuary Theatre, with Torn as artistic director. Its eventual home was at Greenwich House, the

elegant Federal community center on Barrow Street just across from where we lived (and where “My Sister Eileen” purportedly was written), several decades earlier. Page telephoned personally to summon me to an introductory get-together with them, the troupe, and about fifty other potential backers at the Circle Rep “garage” around the corner one afternoon when the theater was dark. She looked exactly as she did on stage and in film—slightly disheveled, with long light brown hair pinned up but falling down—and we found her celebrated tics and mannerisms were built in, along with that devilish Cheshire Cat smile. She diplomatically spent equal time with each of us, and I, for one, was captivated by her relaxed, off-handed charm: a southern belle without the south or the bells. Every time she looked at you or talked, it was like she did so from another time far back beyond memory, as if she had been born ancient and all-knowing. Colleagues of mine who recalled seeing her first great triumph at the Circle-In-The-Square in 1952 in Tennessee Williams’ *SUMMER AND SMOKE* corroborated my impression. She was only twenty-eight then, but already seemed ageless. (Oddly enough, on the other hand, her untimely death in 1987 seemed—and was—sadly premature.)

Rip Torn, uncharacteristically subdued that afternoon, was, by comparison, just beginning to take on the hoary wild-old-man aura that was to be a trademark in his later film career. Born Elmore Rual Torn in Temple, Texas, in 1931, he was seven years her junior when they married—both after previous divorces—in 1961. They played together in a number of New York stage productions, notably works by Williams. She was invariably the star, while he was relegated to minor roles that eventually became associated with him: redneck bullies, southern bigots with hate and revenge written all over them, and evil connivers. Just as his wife’s idiosyncracies were part and parcel of her persona, so his convincing bad-guy interpretations came partly naturally. He had developed a reputation for volatility and stubborn cantankerousness, and there was a growing list of directors who wouldn’t work with him.

He was fine that day, however, and remained seated behind the table strewn with flyers and paper cups. After welcoming each of us, Page joined him, and, all mannerisms subdued, announced a special treat. Liv Ullmann, the Norwegian actress who had only the year before tried stretching her formidable talents into the musical comedy realm with the Rogers/Charnin show *I REMEMBER MAMA* on Broadway, was to give a reading from some works she especially liked. We applauded vigorously as she walked into the room in simple sweater and skirt and seated herself on a high stool under a pin spot, where she enthralled us for an hour or more with excerpts from a variety of material, including several from her successful appearance in the 1977 revival of *ANNA CHRISTIE*.

So far so good. Some of the guests signed up afterwards as backers of the new Sanctuary Theatre, to be joined in time by such others as Dustin Hoffman and Joseph Papp. But, true to my guidelines, I made no commitment before seeing a sampling of what it was offering. That’s why I was in the Great Hall of Greenwich House that evening of March 1, 1980, seated on the ubiquitous hard wooden slat folding chair—waiting for something to begin. Looking around, I realized it was Spring Break time for college students, for there was a preponderance of them (on discount vouchers, no doubt, even though the full price per ticket was five dollars), along with some of the “Golden Agers” who frequented the House.

The curtain-raiser was *WALTER*, directed (as was later *THE FLATULIST*) by Anthony Petito. It was a three-character piece set in a visiting parlor of a funeral home. Walter (played by Joseph Leon) lay dead in his coffin at center stage, his head elevated enough to see his profile. The mortician, Norbe (David Margulies) was arranging chairs in a semicircle around him, when Walter’s wife Laura (Louise Troy) showed up before the other family members to check everything out. The rest was a predictable monologue in which she berated the corpse for everything he had and hadn’t done to and for her in his lifetime. The undertaker had to extricate her from the casket when she got carried away and tried to climb in to take her revenge. She then turned on the undertaker, and, after deciding he wasn’t a fag, tried making out with him, as the sounds of others arriving outside were heard. Curtain.

The mostly young audience considered the playlet a real snooze, and a number of them left at intermis-

sion. But they shoulda stood, for what followed was like nothing they would probably ever witness in their lifetimes.

The title alone, *THE FLATULIST*, should have been enough to indicate that we were about to witness no ordinary run-of-the-mill social satire here. And knowing the work of Murray Schisgal, it wouldn't have dawned on anyone to take the term at its *other* meaning: one who is windy of speech, vain, or puffy (which, in fact, was the case, but only by the way). To tell the story as delicately as possible, the scene is set in the office of Jack Khan (Joseph Leon, raised from the dead) in his upper East Side town house. Kohane is a somewhat bloated, more vulgar version of the famous impresario Sol Hurok (1888-1974), the Russian emigré who began his career arranging concerts for union organizations and ended up representing 4000 of the world's most famous performing artists. As the play begins he is seated at an impressively large desk angled at stage left. Behind him, in the corner, is a coatrack in front of a louvre-blinded window, and all around the room are objects ranging from candlesticks on tables and mantle, figurines, books, wall sconces and a large portrait on the rear center wall over a fireplace. As Jack busies himself on several phones, there is a knock on the door, stage right, and an oddly dressed young man enters with an attaché case. His name, we find, is Gregory (by coincidence played by the same David Margulies who was the hapless janitor in *WEST SIDE WALTZ* with Katharine Hepburn). He wears an odd light blue suit, with an Eisenhower-style jacket on top and trousers made with drop-down buttoned flap in back like Doctor Denton sleepwear. He sets down the briefcase and begins telling why he is there:

His father was one of Jack's most famous clients, a world renowned circus clown, who, he claims, really wanted to be a concert musician, but couldn't because Jack overworked him so that he died exhausted and unfulfilled. Gregory is here to take revenge, and the rest of the play is basically a diatribe in which he tells how. Because his father was always on the road, the boy and his mother seldom saw him in Paris, where they were ensconced in abject luxury. Gregory spent a good deal of his childhood in the Bois de Boulogne, it seems, where he turned an apparently congenital gastrointestinal condition into a pernicious hobby: he found early on that, by dropping his little britches and aiming his rear end at tree trunks, he could wipe out entire colonies of ants and other small insects by farting on them. As he grew older and more proficient, he could demolish larger prey, such as passing birds and small dogs, cats and squirrels. His goal was to build up enough power and expertise to do the same to humanoids who displeased him. But practicing in the Bois was too chancey. He decided to go to New York and try annihilating his nemesis without previous experimentation—this dreadful agent who made his father so rich and famous and unattainable.

Before the Big Undertaking, however, Gregory shows off his prowess by unbuttoning the back flap and taking pot shots at random objects in Jack's office; setting up a machinegun like barrage, he blasts everything off the mantle, desk and coatrack, and causes the wall portrait to spin crazily on its hook. The stage becomes littered with flatulent fallout (credit here the remarkable special effects of James Paul Sherman and sound effects by Bob Saldenberg and Claude Demers). He tops it off with one last detonation that lights the remaining candles on the table.

Jack, by now, is cowering behind his desk with trepidation and implores the young man to reconsider. But Gregory is adamant; he turns his back to him, bends over and, sighting his prey between his knees, lets go Deafening thunder. Blackout. End of play. The outcome is anybody's guess.

When the house lights came on, some audience members sat silently stupefied while others doubled over in laughter. The two actors cautiously picked their way through the debris of Robert Yodice's set for their curtain call; but, finding the applause scant and scattered (people were either too busy laughing or making for the exits), they beat a hasty retreat without caring where they stepped. One felt for them. They'd acquitted themselves admirably under the circumstances. I was relieved that Tom/Page hadn't decided to incorporate an olfactory effect called Smell-O-Rama that was a big innovation back in the late 1940s, when a Broadway play titled *FRENCH TOUCH* was sponsored by a leading perfume maker, who had his product piped

through the heating system of the theater during performances. (On opening night, the essence was blocked backstage by the curtain and almost asphyxiated the cast and crew until it was raised.) The Golden-Ager next to me pronounced the fitting epitaph for THE FLATULIST: as she gathered her things to leave, she muttered, “Quel crap!” Most of us could not have agreed more.

The Sanctuary Theatre, to its credit, did turn out a few perfectly respectable productions during its short existence, including HAMLET in which David Margulies was able to fully redeem himself. But I never got past THE FLATULIST. Few could. It was the stupid plot and the author’s incessant rib-jabbing style that bothered me, not the obsession with an always comical bodily function, however hackneyed. Scatologically related material had always been good for laughs in the theater, probably going back to the first plays in ancient Greece. It had certainly been part of developmental drama at least since Alfred Jarry’s 1896 seminal play called UBU ROI that shocked jaded Parisians with its frank language and raw symbolism, and served as inspiration for movements such as absurdist drama in the 1950s. Early British music hall skits were anal-oriented; American vaudeville and burlesque routines often spun around vulgar double entendres and inuendos.

The boss “stock boy” of a looms parts factory where I worked the summer of 1950 was a retired vaudevillian named Walter Chapin. During breaks he’d regale me with memories of his old two-a-day, new-town-every night years, when he performed everything from soft shoe to black-face, depending on what openings were available. Walter was eighty, but his mind was as sharp and faceted as the flashy “diamond” he still wore on his pinkie for good luck. My favorite routine of his was one he said he’d created, but was later found to have been a comedic standard on the early Keith circuit:

Walter walks out on stage dressed in filthy overalls and approaches a prop bar, behind which the Bartender is polishing glasses.

Walter: “Hey, buddy, gimme a beer.”

Bartender: (recoiling and holding his nose) “My god, where you been? You stink something awful!”

Walter: “Oh, I’m with the traveling circus here in town.”

Bartender: “What the hell do you do in the circus that makes you smell like that?”

Walter: “I march in the Big Parade with the elephants.”

Bartender: “You a trainer?”

Walter: “Not exactly. I walk behind them with a scoop and a broom.”

Bartender: “Well, you better get in another line of work if you wanna come in here.”

Walter (shocked): “WHAT? AND GIVE UP SHOW BUSINESS?”

In more recent memory, a few other related stage incidents stand out, if not as vividly as THE FLATULIST. One was a play whose title draws a blank, but was seen at the Cubiculo Theatre or some such small venue in the mid-1970s. The characters were all insects, and the main action centered on the burgeoning romance between two dung beetles, played by actors in appropriately-designed body suits. Sisyphus-like, they were required to push about spheres of fecal matter three times their size, to which they were permanently attached by umbilical threads. The great balls took up most of the playing area, thwarting all efforts to consummate their frustrating foreplay depicted in a broadly choreographed episode that had the audience in stitches. There was only a handful of patrons there, but they made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in numbers. One was the flamboyant actress Sylvia Miles, who only recently had made headlines for ordering a plate of spaghetti with extra sauce at Sardi’s and dumping it on the head of theater critic John Simon after he’d written a scathing review of one of her recent appearances on Broadway. She shook with laughter until her mascara ran, interrupting the performance with her own appropriate four-letter expletives.

The same expletives, not so gleefully voiced, were employed by theatergoers as they entered the mainstage performance space at the Manhattan Theatre Club one December night in 1989 to see THE ART OF SUCCESS. In place of the usual raked tiers of seats all facing one way, they found a multilevel arrangement around four walls with the stage raised in the center and roped off like a boxing ring. The play toyed with real and

fanciful history, focusing on the life and work of the great eighteenth century painter William Hogarth, and his obsession with the low life of London's seething slums. Other characters were Henry Fielding, playwright and novelist ("Tom Jones"), Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's "first" prime minister, and his alleged paramour, Caroline, queen consort to King George II. The cast also included a smattering of whores and hedonists, and many scenes took place in filthy hovels.

To make the setting more authentic, the floor on which the audiences had to traverse to their seats was strewn with straw and very real-looking plastic turds of varying sizes. It was a performance in itself, as the middle-class, upper middle-aged patrons entered in evening dress and discovered "those!" at their feet: some recoiled into their fur wraps, others sniffed the air, and a few giggled nervously. But hardly anyone left to go out to the lobby during intermission. Fake or not, they just didn't want to have to deal with stepping over those offensive lumps. I played footsie with the one near me and ruminated on the incredible force that was suggestion: the play's *mise-en-scene* had been established before it began. More power to the playwright Nick Dear and director Adrian Noble.

Then there was the Living Theater's presentation of Kenneth Bernard's OR, AND THEREFORE, a two-character play in which one—the Woman —spends the first act walking the other—called the Man as a Dog—while continuously analyzing and commenting on its stool; and the unforgettable Charles Ludlam 1969 send-up, TURDS IN HELL, whose title told it all. But enough! Time to return to a more exalted artistic plane. Having dealt with the Good and Bad of Off Broadway presentations, let's recall some of those that were so highly singular they were in a class of their own.

'N' DIFFERENT'

It was harder to cull representative candidates for this category than for best or worst plays, simply because almost all work seen in experimental theater is, by its very nature, classified as "different," and there were so many memorable moments. So I opted for diversion, hoping to offer a glimpse of the broad and rich spectrum of creativity sampled weekly over a very long time. One of the foremost was a dance piece titled ANIMALS by the acclaimed choreographer and performance artist, Ann Carlson. A lively, attractive dark blonde, originally from Park Ridge, Illinois, she became one of the most eclectic and prolific theater creators of the 1980s, and her materials and subjects were as varied as her performances. It might be remembered from the previous chapter that it was she who preceded John Kelly that unfortunate night when En Garde Arts' attempt to present the second group of single acts featuring performance artists at the Chelsea Hotel was foiled by the fire marshals, leaving her to emerge from her earthen bed in some stranger's loft.

Many of her pieces were created in the series format, like REAL PEOPLE, an ongoing body of performance works begun in 1985, designed to be performed by people gathered together by common profession—lawyers, security officers and basketball players, fly-fishers and fiddlers, school teachers and nuns—rather than by professional dancers impersonating them. This approach was a natural extension of that explored in the experimental dance recitals at the Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square in the early 1960s, when any movement was considered a dance movement, and anyone, any age, who could walk and follow directions was a potential performer. (A "disclaimer" in the playbill for REAL PEOPLE stated, tongue in cheek: "The people, activities and relationships in this performance are real; any resemblance to actual persons, incidents and situations is fully intentional," revealing the sense of humor she possessed and injected into all her pieces to keep them from turning mawkish or overly inspirational. She was fully aware of the danger of making very old or very young participants mere curiosities.)

Ann Carlson graduated magna cum laude from the University of Utah, majoring in modern dance, and went on to earn a master's degree from the University of Arizona. She received many awards for her artistic output, including a "Bessie" in 1988 for ANIMALS. It comprised a suite of five dances that incorporated live

animals in the cast, and dealt with animals in our lives: as symbols, pets and as reflections of our own animal instincts. The series was completed in the summer of 1989 with “Dead,” a piece commissioned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that was performed outdoors with a cast of seventy-five people and one Arabian horse.

The work, without the final segment, premiered at the Dance Theater Workshop in fall, 1988. The first scene, “Scared Goats Faint” had goats grazing within an enclosure, while a highly agitated woman circled it in an increasing state of animation until, at last, she swooned and fell to the floor—a contrast of perceptions: the “docile” animals, the “nervous, aggressive” human. The next piece “The Dog Inside the Man Inside,” revealed a dog, a chair, and Ann Carlson attired in men’s shoes, socks, boxer shorts and a button-down oxford shirt with tie. Critic Jack Anderson (*New York Times*, August 28, 1988) described the action: the “...dog sat calmly [up against the legs of the chair] while Ms. Carlson nevertheless seemed metaphorically ‘leashed’ or ‘collared’ by her ties to the people mentioned in the letters [she was reading].”

“Duck Baby” didn’t employ real ducks, but a little girl represented a duckling playing on the ground, while two adult performers quacked excitedly around her like (human?) parents—a commentary on the concerns of raising the young, avian or otherwise. Despite loud protestations and wild flapping about, the three seemed to form a concerned and congenial family unit. In the next act, “Sarah,” Carlson swayed seductively to a song about a man-eating fish, as she sat in the chair, holding a harmless-looking goldfish in a glass bowl. The implication was that perceptions were deceiving; at times, neither humans nor other animals were benign—that innocent fish could just as well have been a same-sized, but ever so much more dangerous piranha.

The finale, “Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat” was the most poignant (and was reportedly inspired by a case study of a gorilla who befriended a cat). Onto an empty stage Ann Carlson moved in slow, slithery fashion, making gestures that were increasingly like those of a cat. She was completely naked. Performing without clothes (all topless bars aside) is surely one of the hardest things for actors to do in the artificial setting of stage and spotlights. It can look either lascivious or, when the shadows are wrong, hideously grotesque. Carlson’s nudity escaped both degrading extremes, partly by being superbly lit at all time, and because her compact, small-breasted body was firm and supple as an athlete’s, but free of obvious musculature, so every movement was pleasantly voluptuous and feminine. And she was beautifully natural. On a turn, she reached down and scooped up a black kitten with one hand and cradled it in the crook of her elbow as solicitously as a mother cat. They then moved about the space in one of the most unique pas de deux ever devised: two feline figures, the one seeming to mimic the other with its tiny paw. Over the floor they cavorted, chased each other, and swung off a high bar, all to the strains of Beethoven’s String Quartet No. 15, a work the composer himself labeled “a holy song of thanksgiving to God.” Carlson led her furry counterpart through the different movements with such compassion that it led Jack Anderson to conclude that she transcended specific animal imagery to make of it a panegyric to all motherhood.

A famous black and white photo caught them in midair, with Carlson bent forward at the waist, eyes focused on the floor ahead; her legs were in a walking position (only three inches above the stage). In the crook of her left elbow she held the kitten, looking at the same spot as she, with one tiny paw extended toward it, just as her right arm was. The graceful fluidity and searching quality of the pose made it one of the most published pictures of the next year, and found its way to the cover of *American Theatre* magazine. But it only hinted at the strength and originality of the live act, which was like none other I witnessed—a truly inspired entry for the record.

A record of another sort—vinyl—was made and sent to me sometime before 1980, with an accompanying request for funding. It was the nuttiest proposal I was ever to receive by mail. A young man, still in college, had created an LP platter (that shows how long ago it was!) mixing everyday sounds with originally composed “music.” But, and it was a big BUT, he’d programmed it in such a way that any scratches or nicks, or other exterior markings it acquired in its lifetime were, *ipso facto*, to be considered incorporated into the structure

of the piece as part of its composition. According to the letter, he planned to market the disc “raw”—in other words, with no packaging sleeve or protection of any kind. Even fingerprints, accumulated dust and warps would add significantly to rendering each one unique. Its history would develop, it would seem, from everyday wear and tear, beginning with the initial pressing, then shipping, distribution and private handling. I assumed you’d eventually be able to tell an antique (dare I say “collector’s item?”) when external abrasions had completely erased any traces of inherent cacophony. He wanted a grant to set up fabricating facilities.

The petition was so preposterous that I stopped whatever I was doing to try out the record (it had been sent separately from the letter, with nothing but a mailing label taped across one side). As soon as it began playing, it was evident it had already gained a checkered past of sorts—or was that built into the soundtrack?—but not one that promised to hold me enthralled for long. Five minutes of rude noises punctuated with ear-splitting static was enough of an audition. I stopped the machine and was about to throw the disc away, when I reread the end of the letter. The last pitch was: support a project that might be touted as a solution to overloading the Environment with wasteful packaging debris. Perhaps some day, it proclaimed grandly, we would be able to receive everything in its natural state: unboxed, unplastitized, uncellophaned; and wouldn’t that make a better world for us all? (It would certainly make sitting in the movies less irritating, I thought.) It happened that my nephew, Paul Grady Russell, was studying for an engineering degree in packaging design in California at the time, embarking on a career that would eventually make him a recognized leader in environmental waste and packaging reform. I sent him the letter and the recording just as I’d received them. He was appropriately amused, and passed them around to his colleagues. But I don’t think he was ever completely convinced it wasn’t another hoax his crazy uncle had cooked up to put him on. Scout’s honor, P.G., it was for real.

Total environment was the goal of the next entry in our “Different” Hall of Fame. Entitled A.NON, it was billed (correctly) as a “holistic theatre work” designed and directed by Joseph Dunn and Irja Koljonen, and occupied the vast La MaMa Annex for just one day—January 4, 1977. Entering the totally darkened space, one confronted, as Arthur Sainer put it in a *Village Voice* review thirteen days later, “...essentially a condition and a place, an electronic womb for conscious adults who love phenomena and also appreciate comfort that happens to be a little scary”

The interior was so black it was difficult to accustom eyes to it. Inching along, bumping into others doing the same, we saw a faint ray of light transect the middle distance ahead, and collectively made it our destination. As we crept, we became aware of barely discernable lights, perhaps lanterns, high above that, as we neared, grew brighter and became underlit faces made of some metallic substance, sometimes greenish-grey, sometimes blue. Swishing sounds could be heard very close by, while at a distance, almost like remembered past, faint thunder could be detected, followed by soft rhythmic roaring that might have been waves beating on a far shore. The transverse beam grew dimmer as we approached, but its light showed that the faces were mounted atop huge puppet-like bodies swathed, head to toe, in voluminous black capes that hid the performers on whose shoulders tower-like framework must have been attached to hold the faces aloft. When they left the light, individual configurations melted away and they seemed to float around us as one amorphous entity. The swishing sounds had been made by the moving cloaks as they passed. Some of the figures seemed to be maneuvering on stilts, and that may have been the reason everybody was admonished on entering not to touch them. The players, however, were free to brush tenderly against us, and they did so with caressing gestures, allowing the soft black fabric to engulf us momentarily.

It was very soothing once you lost inhibition about being touched and submitted to them. An immense mantle of peace descended gently. You felt you could remain in that safe, warm place forever. As we moved about, less hesitantly now, we became aware that the distant sounds were being interrupted at regular intervals by closer, more urgent rhythmic breathing that also seemed to engulf us and summon recollections of a long-ago prenatal state. (Bruce Eaton had “realized” the extraordinarily effective sounds for the installation.)

“The breathing and the roaring and the quixotic illumination all evoke a sense of expansion and contraction,” Sainer continued, “and it is all as if the natural order, in its womblike manifestation, had been plugged into a circuit that seems alternately benevolent and psychotic.” He added that he thought this particular installation (for that was what it was, more than a “performance,” since it was continuous and lasted from noon to 3:00 PM. and from 9:00 P.M. to midnight; except for duration limitations, ANON had no discernable beginning or end, and individuals could enter or exit at anytime) should somehow be kept as a permanent New York City feature, available for visiting like the Statue of Liberty or the Hayden Planetarium. Its only drawback, he feared, was the almost blatant invitation to passivity it offered at a time when, in our country, withdrawal from social and political responsibilities was becoming endemic.

For me, the experience was like drifting into a vague but pleasant dream and awakening reluctantly, but strangely more aware. The only other works that had similar haunting effects were some of Robert Wilson’s early pieces minus the intimate involvement. James Dunn and his performing company, American Contemporary Theatre (ACT) were based in Buffalo, New York. They had been making holistic magic for some time. From the beginning, he was seriously dedicated to exploring light and darkness, as evidenced in his first remembered work brought to the City and performed on Bleecker Street, AUTOMOBILE GRAVEYARD. Dialogue was important to the pieces then, but became less so as the group developed. Twelve months almost to the day after A.NON, Dunn and Irja Koljonen introduced another work that had no spoken words at all. As cryptically titled as all their works, PREFACE was part of Conchita Gregory’s “A Bunch Festival” and occupied the entire grand ballroom of the moribund New Yorker Hotel at Thirty-fourth Street and Eighth Avenue. The audience was detained in the outer lobby until everything was in readiness. To pass the time, we were handed out programs to familiarize ourselves with the time and place of the piece, which, again, were somewhat ambiguous. We read:

recognizable fundamentals	
present	duration unknown
release	
preface	duration unknown
here	bounded by outer and inner light trajectories
there	bounded by here and elsewhere
elsewhere	

We entered to find an environment of thick luminous fog that obscured everything. Guides positioned us shoulder to shoulder, facing the center, in a circular nether track (“here?”) between corresponding rings of brighter haze. Visibility was so poor, only the silhouettes of the third persons from us on either side were detectable—nothing in front or behind. We were cautioned to remain very still and quiet. Waiting for things to happen, I looked back over my shoulder and could vaguely make out rococo embellishments on a wall. Could that have been the “there,” that was “bounded by here and elsewhere?” And was “elsewhere” the outer lobby or street?

I didn’t have long to ponder locales, for, when we were still and the room entirely silent, the whoosh of unseen, mysteriously propelled forces could be sensed moving within both bands of bright haze, causing air turbulence that intensified as they increased in velocity each time around. Since there was no sound of footfalls, my guess was there were performers on bicycles silently whizzing by very near our faces and backs. We never did learn the source, but it was frighteningly evident that if any of us stepped out of line, we might get creamed.

Frozen *in situ*, we endured the suspense with held breath every time the wind brushed past. Then it became less and less intense and circled around less often until it finally stopped, and all was quiet and still again. We breathed evenly, our ears cocked to hear what happened next. But, instead of sound, the intensity of the outer ring of light diminished noticeably as the inner one radiated increasingly more brightly. Soon the center of the room was glowing redder and redder, like a great conflagration seen through dense smoke, and became

so brilliant we had to narrow or avert our eyes. The fog thinned enough to be able to make out the outlines of our counterparts on the opposite side of the circle, across a central pile of what, in the red glow, looked to be embered remains of some outerspace disaster. We were drawn to it as to a magnet, only to find a fanciful sculptural construction of ordinary boards and pieces of metal beneath strong overhead spotlights.

The illusion was ended. No one had to inform us that PREFACE was over (in fact there was no one there but us spectators when the atmosphere cleared and the entire room was visible, just as we saw no one after the guides led us initially to our places). I circumnavigated the ersatz “bonfire,” stopping to regard this or that detail, and, rubbing eyes that smarted from the artificial nebulous condition, returned to the “present.” I passed from “here” to “there” to “elsewhere” and onto the sidewalk, smiling at the realization that Dunn and company needed only provide me a few clever minimal “inducements.” The disquieting experience that followed was largely self-created. The mind was, indeed, the eighth deadly sin.

In a little side chapel within the tenebrous expanse of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the seat of the Episcopal Diocese of New York City, a very different type of environment was attempted at a private concert on December 13, 1981, at 7:30 in the evening—an environment only of sound created solely by human voices. The eight-member Harmonic Choir performed the premiere of a new composition entitled “Outside of Being There” Parts I, II, III, written and conducted by its director David Hykes. My interest in the group had been sparked a year earlier after a representative of the city’s culture council, who knew of our previous involvement with experimental music projects, called to say here was one of the most talented and (thus eligible for this section) “different” groups around.

The Harmonic Choir was formed in 1975 by David Hykes, a recognized avant-garde filmmaker who also happened to love Western sacred and folk music. He was drawn to the vocal traditions of West and Central Asia after hearing the *Hoomi* (throat) singing native to the Tuvan region of Russia and Western Mongolia, and the overtone chanting of the school of Tantric Buddhism in Tibet. In *Hoomi* singing, the (male) singer produces a basic tone, or drone, in the baritone or lower register, and then, by manipulating abdominal and chest muscles and adjusting the larynx, jaws, tongue and lips, is able to produce a higher tone (or tones) that can be sounded at the same time, almost like singing a duet with oneself. Those higher notes are known as “overtones” or “harmonics,” hence the group’s name.

The process is very complex and I don’t pretend to understand entirely how those simultaneous sounds are produced. Suffice it to say, it is all within the power of the human mechanism, as demonstrated by Asian monks for hundreds of years. Although very difficult to do, an experienced singer can clearly deliver overtones up to fifteen tones above the original base note, and it is possible to hear much higher tones resonated. The “hearing” is as important as the generating process. The listener must concentrate intently and be fully receptive to the vibrations produced. An almost trance-like stillness is necessary for successful transmission.

The Choir had been given rehearsal quarters in one of the Cathedral administrative buildings, and it was there that Hykes experimented with combinations of *Hoomi* and traditional polyphonic singing. He wrote compositions that employed multiple basic drones to be sung by male *and* female members at different pitches at the same time, then the corresponding harmonic overtones. The progressions could be notated precisely, and soon “harmonic” music became a language of pure number, calculable like mathematical equations. What emerged was a unique modern phenomenon that recalled twelfth and thirteenth century *organum* (the singing of the same melodic line at intervals of a fourth, fifth, or octave at the same time) and *melisma* (a phrase of several notes sung to one syllable of text) of liturgical plainsong. The more convoluted the Harmonic Choir’s pieces became, the richer and more rewarding they were aurally.

What better setting, then, than inside a great cathedral. That night in December 1981, after the guests were seated in the candlelit stone chapel off the north transept, the choir entered in plain robes and sat facing each other in a circle. “Outside of Being There” began with a solo by Hykes slow intonations that set the eerie

otherworldly aura that continued throughout. Then, as if chanting responses to the versicals of a high priest (and Hykes seemed to have attained that status among some of his cult followers, as evidenced by the kind of adulation lavished on him at an ensuing reception), the other singers repeated and embellished his examples. Before long, the air filled with the strange reverberations of drones and overtones on top of overtones. The more one concentrated, the more combinations were realized. Theodore Levin, in an introductory note to the program, wrote, “Hykes’ composition for harmonically-trained voices contains both composed harmonic structures, and others which arise extemporaneously through the process of harmonization, which poses new demands each moment. The challenge of performing and listening to the piece is to keep one’s listening throughout alive, absorbing—as literally as possible—the harmony of the group at all its co-present sound levels.”

The consonances and dissonances thus absorbed seemed not to be made by human voices. A 1980 composition by Hykes, heard in the same setting, was titled “Hearing Solar Winds,” and that came closest to describing what the sensation was like. The accumulation of such strange sounds also had its unsettling side. Their vibrations crowded the little chamber, pushing against the ear, and producing a feeling of claustrophobia—of being penned in in an increasingly alarming way, much like experiencing the accelerating rushes of air in the American Contemporary Theatre’s PREFACE. One felt isolated, vulnerable, and intimidated—as well as thrilled.

The necessity for complete concentration on the part of the audience and the singers, the lack of visual diversity (remaining still and transfixed was necessary to accomplish what they did), the fact that they might not be able to produce the right sounds in every setting, and the need to limit attendance narrowed the Harmonic Choir’s potential as a viable touring attraction—on the college circuit, for example. Jane Yockel of Performing Artservices and I agonized over the problem. Both of us were dedicated, after all, to finding as wide exposure as possible for exciting new talent. But here it seemed an impossibility. We continued funding it for several years anyway; something that “different” deserved to exist for its own sake. Recalling work of both the American Contemporary Theatre and Harmonic Choir brought to mind an appropriate passage from Dante’s *Paradiso*:

*“...The newness of the sound,
And that great light, inflamed me with desire,
Keener than e’er was felt, to know their cause...
Thou art not on the earth as thou believest”*

STREET SEEN

The best “Street Seen” has been saved for last. It, too, involved an environmental topic, but dealt with it in a hilariously eccentric way. It also made you feel you were “not on the earth as thou believest.” It happened one unseasonably balmy fall evening in 1989 in front of the Ohio Theatre at 66 Wooster Street. The Ohio was an established rental facility where groups that didn’t have their own performing spaces had been appearing for years. Situated on a dark stretch of one of lower Soho’s liveliest thoroughfares, it was relatively accessible and affordable (though rents skyrocketed after the mid-1980s). But its low entrance was so unremarkable it was customary to position an outsized sandwichboard on the sidewalk near the door to mark the location and announce current attractions, Cucaracha style.

Once inside, a stairway led up one-half flight on the right to a small lobby, formed by fabric hung between the first row of structural columns that regularly punctuated the big, equally nondescript former warehouse. It was there that theatergoers were detained (sometimes forever) while whatever troupe appearing at the time did some last-minute rehearsing. Patrons would queue up to the makeshift ticket counter at the far end, then return to await the parting of the drapes. That night, probably because of the heat, a set of large steel doors

had been thrown open, leaving a square hole the size of the back end of a delivery truck facing out toward the street, four feet above ground level. Some of us early arrivals were standing near its edge, vaguely preoccupied with what went on in front of the lowered metal shutters and locked landing doors lining the opposite sidewalk.

As was usual when wholesalers closed at the end of the day in that neighborhood, accumulated rubbish was sealed in cardboard boxes and placed at the curbs for latenight pickup. There was a half dozen of them stacked neatly against one side of the lamp post directly across from us. But on the other was what looked to be a huge mound of loose aluminum cans mixed with plastic gallon containers, sprawled the breadth of the sidewalk and spilling into the gutter. The few individuals who sauntered past circled out into the street to skirt it. But when a black ragpicker, who we'd watched methodically working each successive refuse pile along the block, came upon it, he stopped and eyed it with the awe of a connoisseur contemplating Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." He rubbed his hands together at all that refundable potential—the pot at the end of the proverbial rainbow!—and got to work.

He set down his foraging sacks and probed the mound with one ill-matched sneaker. Like a kid in front of a triple-scoop sundae, he didn't know where to start. He gave it a few exploratory kicks, then fell on his knees and pulled the sacks closer, opening the mouth of one of them wide in anticipation. Whadda haul! To get started he grabbed three cans with one hand and tried extricating them from the pack. They didn't come loose. He yanked again, and then again. The cans moved, but all in a body. Goddammit, they were all stuck together somehow! He dropped the sack to use both hands in scooping up a bigger bunch. He sank them into the cans' mass. No luck. He sank deeper, and suddenly, from within the amorphous mass came a low threatening growl. The bum looked up at all of us on the landing, then back. It sounded again, and the entire mound began to shift. The clanking cans created a dull metallic cacophony as they arose *en masse*. The bum was pushed back off his knees by the impact. The growling became howling as the "thing" grew taller and "stood up." Scared out of his wits, the vagrant reclaimed his baggage and hightailed it down the street, yelling at us as he passed, "Dis fuckin woild gets nuttier all de time. I aint messin wit shit like dat. Who needs it, right?"

We nodded in agreement, then returned our attention to the aluminum marvel, fully erect now, and stretching stubby fat appendages, all heavy with cans also. In fact, every inch of IT was encased. No face showed, nor hands, nor, for that matter, any hint of a humanoid shape except for the abbreviated stumps. There was just this big lump, like a spaceage Michelin man or a medieval knight with his armor up in curlers. We shook our heads in amused astonishment. Now we'd seen EVERYthing! IT must have been snoozing when the bum began prodding, for it lumbered about aimlessly on the sidewalk for a few minutes, muttering incoherently. By then, the actors behind the curtains had learned of the spectacle and joined us on the landing, along with still-arriving patrons. It grew very crowded. Our laughter and conjectures caught IT's attention. The can mass spun around and one stump was raised in a waving gesture, setting off a clamor befitting the final bars of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture."

Having got our eye (and ear), IT began to perform a little skit. One stump reached down, picked up the end of a stout rope, and IT shuffled up the sidewalk a ways. Along the length of the rope were tied the plastic gallon containers in many-colored clusters that thudded dully as they bounced. IT stopped and coiled them into a tight round "ottoman," then clomped back to where IT started, took a running leap and landed squarely on top of it. The momentum sent the blob and cushion down the sidewalk like a tot on a sled in snow. The audience applauded and whistled. The aluminum wonder got up, bowed as best it could, then rearranged the containers and did it again. Then once more. Our attention flagged, and IT sensed it. Clanking back to square one, IT fumbled under the stack of cardboard boxes and withdrew a gleaming chrome unicycle. Our interest was restored. The cycle disappeared among the cans between its "legs," and the next thing we knew, IT was wheeling off up the sidewalk in the direction of midtown, trailing the rope and bouncing bottles behind. We

applauded again and waved. Almost out of earshot, as we were being summoned in to the scheduled performance, some of us heard a voice up the block shout, “I love recycling so much I save EVERYTHING. Get it?” The honking of impatient cross-town traffic sounded a fitting coda as the Can Man blocked the intersection and our ushers closed the steel doors.

The play we saw that night left no impression at all. Its title couldn’t even be remembered later. But, then, it didn’t have a chance, following an act that could only be billed as next-to-closing. A friend said she spied the same creature tooling down the middle of Fifth Avenue near Rockefeller Center one high noon not long afterward, and the commotion caused, pedestrian *and* vehicular, created a turbulent wake that extended for blocks. She said even the pigeons—those hardboiled New Yorkers that usually wouldn’t give an oncoming taxi the time of day—flew up out of the way.

Just as the Harmonic Choir attempted to suffuse the air with unheard-of sounds in 1981, so another company, a decade earlier, tried to engage it in a different way—bodily. Stephanie Evanitsky, a sturdy, athletic young woman of great determination and some imagination, hit upon the idea of combining dance and acrobatics into a new aerial performance medium. She founded the Multigravitational Experiment Group to explore ways of moving in space with terpsichorean discipline. Its initial efforts, presented at the Brooklyn Museum in 1972, proved as unwieldy and cumbersome as its name, and about as inspired. Someone suggested it was a moa in the making.

The first program consisted of two segments under the title AERODANCE. The opening piece saw the company of four, in leotards and animal masks, combining dance movements with gymnastics. The “set” was a complex metal and wood scaffolding reminiscent of neighborhood Jungle Gyms, that the “beasts” clambered over, changing levels by slithering through connecting plastic tube passageways. As energetic and agile as the performers were, the movements were repetitious and mundane. The fact that they were just up there, balancing and mobile, seemed to be sufficient initially.

The next segment was a bit more adventurous. After a half-hour or so, the “animal act” ended and the quartet returned to wipe off the sweat and change leotards. Stagehands replaced the plastic tubing with dangling auto tires, and the fliers returned to finish off the event with more scrambling over the set and swinging on and in the tires, this time without masks. Jack Anderson, the critic covering the performance for Dance Magazine (September 1972), found them too deliberate in pace—either too fast or too slow, with no transitional tempos—and the choreography lacking the flashiness of conventional acrobatics or the sustained phrasing of dance.

The next time the company was seen, in February 1974, it was a bit more polished and its movements more varied. The scaffolding, however, was even more complicated: dense arrays of hanging ropes, leather slings, bars, loops, hammocks and swings had replaced the tubes and tires, floating in the Space for Innovative Development, the converted church on West Thirty-fifth Street. The piece had slow, medium and fast movements but they were hobbled, not only by the snarl of flight devices, but also by unintended sound effects: each time anyone moved up there, one heard such creaking, gnawing, rubbing, groaning and squalling as hadn’t been experienced since the days of Boris Karloff horror flicks. An intimate embrace on two separate swings with the actors kissing one moment might end up with their lips suddenly two feet apart the next, while they both pumped at the side ropes to get together again. Perspiration was another hazard; the audience winced as performers swan-dived from an upper to lower contraption for fear that they’d slip right off.

There were nice things about the troupe’s efforts, though: runs spectacularly suspended in air; bodies drifting horizontally in multi-leveled slings; and breathtaking swooping bird arcs ending in fish-swims. Enough to give hope that someday, if someone could design rigging that was more flexible and less visible—or noisy—there might be a new dimension added to contemporary drama, ten feet up in space.

In April 1984, Martha Clarke partially fulfilled that hope in a stunning work she conceived and directed at St. Clement's. Produced by Lyn Austin's Music Theatre Group /Lenox Arts Center (MTG /LAC), with a grant from Pierre Cardin, it was called THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS, based on Hieronymus Bosch's painting by the same name, and was performed by seven dancers and three musicians, most of them members of Crowsnest, an internationally renowned company co-founded by Clarke, noted for its dramatically oriented movements. The music was composed by Richard Peaslee in collaboration with the musicians, Eugene Friesen, Bill Ruyle, and Steven Silverstein.

Martha Clarke first came to attention when she was a dancer/choreographer member of the eclectic Pilobolus Dance Theatre from 1972-1978. After forming her own troupe, she also began directing plays, and was the recipient of an Obie Award in 1982 for her direction of the MTG/LAC production of A META-MORPHOSIS IN MINIATURE, co-winner in the Best New American Play category the same year. Richard Peaslee was no stranger to our foundation: he wrote scores for Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater productions as well as for Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival, most notably RICHARD III in the summer of 1983. He also wrote music for Peter Brook/Royal Shakespeare Company's MARAT/SADE and MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, and for dance companies such as that of Twyla Tharp, the Joffrey Ballet and Kathryn Posin. His concert works had been performed by leading national orchestras, including the Philadelphia under Eugene Ormandy.

Clarke chose as her inspiration Hieronymus Bosch's famous triptych on view at del Prado Museum in Madrid. Bosch (1450-1516) was known for large enigmatic panels depicting disturbing mixtures of religious, nightmarish and fantastical elements, with decidedly ghoulish overtones, that greatly influenced twentieth century surrealist painters. THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS comprised three segments. The first involved Adam and Eve miming the Biblical account of Man's creation, surrounded by strangely costumed "animals" on all fours, three of which were the piece's musicians.

The second episode involved Civilization—or at least that part of it made up of lowland peasants romping about in what resembled the aftermath of a particularly indulgent New Year's Eve celebration. Rude gestures, feigned defecation, drunken slobbering, eructating, and all sorts of sexual congress were woven stylistically into a living tapestry. The festivities turned sow and menacing after sacks of potatoes spilled out, sending the citizenry into frenzied clawing and bashing in attempts to retrieve and devour them. The music also waxed ominous, and the lighting (superbly orchestrated by Paul Gallo, who had also worked on many Broadway and Off Broadway productions, as well as those for the New York Shakespeare Festival) turned everything the same brown gravy tones that dominated Bosch's originals.

The third "movement" created Chaos. In darkness, the audience became aware of rushes of air overhead. Looking up, slowly identifiable figures—Angels—could be discerned, soaring, "swimming" and tumbling in space, appearing from somewhere up back and farming out toward the stage. Watching the slow, graceful—and *silent*—movements of the dancers, whose minimal harnesses and thin suspension wires were entirely visible, brought thoughts of their less fluid predecessors' clumsy apparatus, and I opined that if Stephanie Evanitsky or any of her cohorts were to witness this performance, the jolt might approximate that of the Wright Brothers viewing a supersonic jet. Innovators rather than inventors are usually the ones who turn original concepts into art, and here was a case in point. The wafting bodies gave us the feeling we, too, were suspended on light zephyrs.

When the "angels" neared the earth, fog machines were turned on overtime and soon the front of the theater was a sinister haze, as they were transformed into dead souls hurtling down into the red masses of Hell. The man responsible for the flying was Peter Foy, who had been "floating" actors for years, beginning with Mary Martin, then Sandy Duncan as Peter Pan on Broadway, and Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Jack Benny, and Sally Fields (the Flying Nun) in films.

Ultimately, of course, the piece's success owed most to the vision and direction of Martha Clarke. She

evoked the moods of Bosch's panels without slavishly copying them. Whether what she produced was dance or theater was argued in the press for a long time after the show's run ended (it was revived by popular demand the following November and played St. Clement's again to sold-out houses). It was so different that neither and both categories claimed it. For me, the setting—back in the old sanctuary where the Foundation and I began, so to speak—rekindled nice memories.

A LA C(ART)E

A small tight cluster of people stood on the sidewalk in front of an East Third Street building just before noon on June 6, 1984. It was a remote part of the East Village for most of them—between First and Second Avenues—so they didn't venture far behind the curb or the vacant overgrown lot next door. I'd recently sworn off smoking for all eternity, so, to avoid the smokers and the temptation, I circled the periphery, involved but aloof at the same time. Few of those there knew each other or what we were supposed to do after arriving at the site. All we'd been told by the telephone message was to be there by noon sharp and not eat lunch beforehand.

I was marveling at how the *iolanthis* trees and wild plants managed to take hold in the rubble of old tires and car parts strewn about the abandoned property, where there seemed to be no dirt or fertilization, when a young woman appeared and, with accustomed authority, called to us to gather round for a nose count. There had to be twelve before she would proceed further. There were ten. So, while awaiting the remaining proboscises, she explained, in a blowzy voice that matched her hair and demeanor, that after entering the apartment house we would have to climb up five steep flights of stairs to the performance venue, so she wasn't about to make the round trip more than once. We would just have to wait. She pressed both hands into the small of her ample back and rolled her eyes upward, which we correctly took as a sign of spinal fatigue. We nodded sympathetically, checked our watches, and scanned the immediate horizon. In a few minutes three breathless young women darted around the corner and joined us. The guide, Shauna O'Donnell, recounted and came up with thirteen. One of the late comers—they all looked like secretaries—had brought a friend, and was it all right? She didn't have time to call in advance. "Well, I guess a baker's dozen is still a dozen, right?" Shauna concluded, and unlocked the outer door. (In truth, that performance, like each in this particular series, was sold out weeks before, so she was assuming authority she probably knew she didn't have. But, a bird in hand...)

Dutifully we followed her, two by two, up the inner enclosed well like creatures in the hold of that Biblical cruise ship. Each ascending step brought back memories of my days on Barrow Street a seeming century ago. The stairwell here was wider and better lit, but the feeling of the place was similar. Any moment I expected Mrs. Bertelotti, or Rex or Louise or Tony to pop out and ask what's new. No one talked on the way up. We were saving our breath for the top. Even so, we arrived on the fifth floor huffing, puffing and pressing our hearts. The beautiful June weather that, until then, had been comfortably acceptable, was suddenly hot and stifling. Off came sweaters and jackets and those of us with ties jerked them loose and tore open collars.

Shauna led us through an already open doorway, across a spotless kitchen to a room about ten by seventeen feet, where a personable young man (the apartment dweller) greeted us, and indicated two snug rows of chairs at one end. We filed in and seated ourselves, noisily repositioning them (a study once determined that it was animal instinct for humans to rearrange loose chairs before sitting in them, even if by an inch or so, as we had—something about the need to define individual territories). The young man then told us the name of the piece we were about to "partake of" that he admitted having conceived and written. It was called *AND ANOTHER*, but, he added, we shouldn't try to make too much out of the title. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a great "theatrical and culinary" experience. His boyish grin, big black eyes and shock of dark hair, along with a well-proportioned, compact body that moved with the suppleness of a dancer or athlete (he was both) captivated at least the two secretaries seated beside me. One whispered, not-so-sotto-voce, "God, he's cute!" "Short and sweet," the other said as she settled into what she'd already decided was going to be a very

meaningful alternate lunch period.

Had he said “partake” and “culinary”? Indeed. No sooner were we in place than he and Shauna approached a sizable table with a cutting board on it, stage right, under windows that faced north with a view over surrounding tenements to distant midtown towers. They carefully prepared appetizers of juices, fruit, granola and yogurt while reciting cryptic poetry and engaging in rather bizarre repartee. I perused the printed sheet that was placed on my chair. It was a playbill and menu combined. The players, it seemed, were to be the items of consumable food; the humans, the manipulators, like in Japanese *bunraku*. It read, after the title, author, and dates of performance,

CAST

Juices	Orange, Apple, Carrot, Ginger
Fruit	Pineapple, Strawberries
Granola	Oats, Bran, Sesame Seeds, Sunflower Seeds, Raisins, Corn Oil, Vanilla, Maple Syrup
Yogurt	Itself
“The Spreads”-	
Spread #1	Chickpeas, Green Pepper, Tahini, Garlic, Salt, Olive, Oil, Paprika
Spread #2	Cream Cheese, Watercress, Radishes, Scallions
Spread #3	String Beans, Onions, Walnuts, Eggs, Pepper, Salt, Coriander, Cumin
Spread #4	Avocado, Papaya, Lime, Juice, Umeboshi Vinegar
Bagels	Gluten, Flour, Whole Wheat Flour, Maple Syrup, Salt, Water, Yeast
Raspberry Tarts . .	Almond, Oats, Whole Wheat Flour Maple Syrup, Corn Oil, Raspberry Jam
Lemon Moons . .	Whole Wheat Flour, White, Flour, Maple Syrup, Corn Oil, Baking Powder, Salt, Lemon Juice, Lemon Rind
Fish	The World

Behind the author and Shauna, objects that I assumed usually occupied the room had been stacked against the wall and covered with sheeting. Next was a freestanding closet and then shelves filled with books and various other items. Unremarkable paintings and prints hung in frames all about. Beside the door we’d entered was another the same size that led to a smaller darkened room, that in turn opened back onto the kitchen, facilitating movements in and out of the playing space. Shauna and the author passed around the juice and “hors d’oeuvres” on large platters after having ascertained our preferences and concocted made-to-order combinations. As we munched and sipped (everything was delicious), the telephone began ringing loudly. No one reached for it. At length the answering machine picked up and from it was heard a woman’s voice with a decidedly French accent, saying, “Hello It is time for the performance to begin.” It then clicked off.

With yogurt still on our chins, our attention was diverted to a commotion in the standing closet. It became obvious from the increasing pounding and muffled cries inside that someone or something was desperately trying to get out. Eventually the doors flung open and out stepped another young man in rumpled chef hat and apron. Taller and a bit heavier than the author, he seemed somewhat dazed and disoriented from having been cooped up in that airless environment at least since before we arrived. He trailed after him a tangled mass of clothing on hangers and random shoes. As he strode to the table, singing an obscure refrain from an equally obscure musical, whose lyrics went something like, “Leave you? Leave you? How could I leave you? How could I go it alone.” (Which, at this writing, now seems very like something from CAMELOT), he broke

into a little buck and wing.

When he reached the cutting board, he introduced himself, mononymically, as Zack, just Zack, and took over the next step in the piece, while Shauna acted as the server. Our cute, short, sweet author was the go-fer, making repeated forays to the darkened room and kitchen for utensils and additional food items Zack demanded. The first of three subsequent courses followed, starring “The Spreads and Bagels”. Again, each member of the select audience was canvassed for preferences, and again each item was prepared to order. But this time, when all was in readiness, instead of passing the food around, we were invited to come to the table and partake buffet style. Unbeknownst, while we busied ourselves as “participants”, eating and kvetching (by now most of the group was quite chummy), the author began surreptitiously removing articles from the room and hiding them in the dark place. When we’d look around, things didn’t seem quite as they were, but we couldn’t tell why. Soon, potted plants disappeared, then the dresser, books, and stereo. As we filled up, the room emptied out.

To keep us diverted from the author’s ruse, Zack and Shauna mingled with groups of us, engaging in bizarre but stimulating conversation. Occasionally the author joined in. But during those times, he and Zack would break out into loud disagreements, then shouting matches, encouraging the audience to participate with its own opinions. Shauna would scream at them from her own conversation group, and we became disoriented. Then things calmed down and we were invited back to the table for the next “act”—Raspberry Tarts and Lemon Moons. Soon all the chairs were gone, leaving us milling about an empty space. To assuage our growing concern, the trio broke into a goodnatured little “right-angled” dance, darting round and round through the doorways while singing a riff in three-part harmony, “Leave it Behind the Door”. The baker’s dozen huddled closer together for protection, clinging to crumbly plates and plastic glasses, as we were forced back by the exuberant choreography. Some like myself, still near the table, popped a couple more Lemon Moons and gulped the remaining Apple Juice. I turned to look out one of the sparkling clean windows. The panorama was spectacular at that time of day. The rooftops leading northward resembled those of Siena or other northern Italian towns—all ochres, russets and blacks. The sky was a penetrating cobalt.

Mass movement behind me interrupted my reverie. Someone said the author had left the apartment. Was it time to go? What about the enigmatic listing on the program/menu: Fish.....The World? We’d never know. Zack and Shauna were herding the first contingency out through the kitchen. I descended the stairs with the secretaries, who were miffed at not seeing the author one more time. All the way down, they pumped me about him, repeating how weird it was for him to just walk out on us like that. Was that part of the deal, or what? Who was this guy? I could only tell them then that I’d seen him perform with other ensemble groups in other artists’ pieces, but this was my first time there and I knew little more than they did. It didn’t take long to gather some information however, for I was intrigued enough to want to see more of his work.

He had moved to New York a year or so before our celebrated “lunch encounter” from his native Trumbull, Connecticut, and worked as a dancer and musician (he was a terrific jazz saxophonist) at Danspace in St. Mark’s-in-the-Bowery. Before long he was involved in avant-garde movement theater with Yoshiko Chuma and The School of Hard Knocks, Daniel McCusker, Ping Chong, and Mabou Mines. In 1988 he teamed with Dan Hurlin (partly under our aegis) for an acclaimed work, THE JAZZ SECTION, at P.S. 122. The plot, briefly, told how jazz music was banned after the 1943 occupation of Czechoslovakia. But the puppet Czech government decided to allow a bit of the “decadent” music along with mild rock-and-roll in its youth clubs, basically to keep them under surveillance and control. However, by 1986, the number of jazz fans had grown so alarmingly, it threatened to get out of control. Some executive committee members of the Jazz Section of the Czech Musicians Union were arrested and sentenced to from ten to sixteen months in prison, ostensibly for allowing, besides forbidden music, pamphlets and journals denouncing the current regime to be circulated. Also on display in their clubrooms were examples of “on the edge” plastic and visual arts guaranteed to offend the bourgeois sensibilities of the proletariat.

THE JAZZ SECTION, a moody tone poem, dealt with the Kafkaesque trial of one of the executives, Karel Srp (Hurlin). The co-creators set it back in 1940 Germany, where there was not only a similar ban on the music, but also on those players most likely to make it—Negroes and Jews. The result was a piece about artistic censorship that could apply to any country anytime. Dan Hurlin created the stage movements, while our erstwhile “gofer” composed and performed the saxophone score. The instrument became the piece’s symbol of defiance and freedom, and at the end was hoisted aloft over silhouetted stage debris left after the plot’s mayhem, destruction and murder. It floated about the air like the spirits in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, spotlighted in the darkness—and playing (an acoustical device was hidden inside). Prominent in a splendid cast, besides Roy Nathanson, Mandy Gross, and Chris Lindsay, was Mary Shultz as Srp’s destitute wife turned into a cruelly subjected Jewess.

Our “gofer” went on to design bigger and more elaborate (but not better) “performance meals”, too large to be accommodated in his tiny flat. At P.S 122, in a work entitled *RONALD REAGAN* (1986), for instance, sixty partakers were seated at a table that snaked through the premises, with a menu-cast that included Vegetarian Chili, Corn Bread, Yams, Salad, and Apple Pie, all “nutrish, delish, and avant-garde”. The point of these innovative pieces, their originator explained, was the same as that of entering and exiting the room in *AND ANOTHER*: it was all “about drawing personal boundaries in relationships, and then crossing them...A lot of images were about vacating—leaving a relationship, moving out of one’s home, the disappearance of food from the table. [Now I could have helped the secretaries out!] It was inspired, at least in part,” he confided, “by my ex-lover having moved out less than a year before.” Through the serving of food, he was able to transport a performance into another dimension—one of rare intimacy in which total strangers interacted with friendly, chatty good neighborliness.

In later years, when a knee injury temporarily curtailed the dancing part of his career, he focused more closely on music and explored its possibilities for producing “spiritual food,” evident in *KNEE DEEP IN A KISS* (1989), *HORN* (1990) with David Dorfman, who was to become a frequent partner in future collaborations, and *SEVENTEEN KILOS OF GARLIC* (1991), all of which featured his saxophone playing.

The garlic above referred to a charm that Old World saxophonist Eli Lipschitz’s Old World Jewish mother strung together from the bulbous plants and tacked up around her door to keep her son out in the play. But it nevertheless harked back to that original 1984 repast on the fifth floor on Third Street that was so different, so unique, I was never able to forget it. The wit and style of the presentation was infectious. I don’t think anybody there left in a mean mood. Martha Clarke may have created a gorgeous garden of earthly—but ultimately inedible—delights; but here was someone who reaped harvests from one, that could be partaken of by anyone present. In an *East Village Eye* interview, after his *AN ATTACK on/of LONELINESS* opened at P.S. 122 in January 1984, he admitted, with his usual devilish grin, to wanting to evoke a certain sense of symbolic cannibalism in his “eating pieces”:

“In a sense I wanted the audiences to eat the performer and vice versa—a total processing of another person.” He also confessed to “...wanting to be part of the group and yet wanting to be away from it; wanting to be done with the performance, but not wanting the performance to end.” (He walked out before the end of each *AN ATTACK* performance, but not until everyone was properly served and he had danced and played his saxophone atop the table. Prior to that he also had managed a comical strip, removing the outfit he was wearing and then donning a brand new one without disturbing the chef’s apron tied around his waist.)

Who was that sexy saxophonist, that culinary cannibal? By a sublime mixture of coincidence, irony and humorous intent, his name was a homonym of the collective term for the apples, oranges, lemons, pineapples, strawberries, etc. he recruited as his “casts”. So it’s been saved as a final treat—the postprandial mint from the dish by the cashier:

The mover and shaker of all *DAT FRUIT* was...*DAN FROOT*.

Chewing the scenery was nothing new in the theater, nor was making mincemeat out of plays and performers by critics. But Dan Froot, bless him, carried the alimentary analogy to new heights of consumer consumption. He had also hit on an important point that experimental theater practitioners tended to overlook in their self-absorption: the role of audiences as equal partners in the creative process. From experience, I learned that it takes three elements in collaboration to make a live performance a work of art: in visual art terminology, first comes the playwright/thought provoker, who determines the size and subject of the canvas and sketches in the major details; second, the director and performer (along with the technical staff) who, as the brushes, spread and blend the colors within the outlines; and third, the audience, whose imagination completes the picture. The best performances, like museum masterpieces, are those that transport us somewhere—not necessarily a *place*—and return us enlightened, or at least wiser for the journey. Artaud, Ionesco and Pirandello would no doubt agree that drama was philosophical or it was nothing. I would substitute “spiritual” for “philosophical” and hope that Richard Foreman and Lee Breuer would back me up. To take the trip, one thing’s for sure: you’d better have your bags packed and waiting.

Playwrights are the shadowy members of the triumvirate. The public rarely sees them or, unfortunately, remembers their names, unless they are very famous; but, like diffident jungle birds, they can sometimes be heard at performances of their own work, laughing loudest and applauding longest from the very last rows. The third contingency—the audience—is us, and we know (or should) who we are. So it is the second group, especially the performers, we identify with most. If it seems I have been having undue fun with them here, well, it’s true; but never, I hope, intentionally at their expense. *Having* fun is not the same as making it. I developed early an abiding respect for those gifted ones, who were called upon to dignify sometimes demeaning roles; give substance to nothing; and make sense out of nonsense. Like a river, they were the constant on which everything was floated. They all possessed guts, pluck, resilience, stamina, determination and enough versatility to be able to crawl on command one moment and fly the next. None I encountered ever did it for the money; in fact, many deliberately chose to commit themselves to working altruistically and without recognition throughout their theatrical careers.

Unfortunately, the experimental drive that fired 1960s creativity had lost most of its momentum by 1980, as fewer new forms and ideas surfaced to challenge those dedicated ones. It was a time of dormancy and *déjà vu*, of reexamining and reworking the forms and theories developed twenty years earlier by such as Grotowski, Chaikin and Brook, who, themselves, had harked back for their inspirations to the movements of the 1930s and earlier: Antonin Artaud and his theater of cruelty; Bertolt Brecht’s political theater; the theater of the absurd of Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett; and before that the symbolist and expressionist theater of turn of the century Germany; and even, without, perhaps, fully recognizing it, the mythic, “communal” theater of the opera composer/playwright, Richard Wagner in the 1880s (to whom we owe an everlasting debt for being the first to make theaters go dark before performances began, creating that magical moment alluded to so often). Experimental theater in 1985, then, was still hung up on a fifty-year old mindset, and in deperate need of new input.

What avant-gardists had going for them in the 1960s, that helped them create a cohesive ensemble atmosphere, were the Vietnamese War and current social and political situations, against which they could make protest as a community. That was not the case a quarter century later, when the worst threats were private ones—the dreaded AIDS epidemic, general complacency, and increasing isolation between artists and audiences, and artists with each other.

Within the last generation we’d seen significant growth in some art forms—particularly film, video and pop music—and its effective impact on audiences, that not only reflected changes in taste, but, in some part, induced them. Cinematic concepts were influencing literature; visual artists were giving tangible shapes to ideas heretofore expressed only by words; rock concerts and modern technology were teaming up to blow away old approaches to musical staging. Live experimental theater, once the forerunner, was left searching for

its trail blazers, its audience, and its future course. Television, almost single-handedly, stole its most potent trump, innovation; everything new was aired before millions of viewers and gobbled up along with the rest of the pap with hardly a blink. There was no longer anything special about avant-garde. There was no longer an avant-garde.

That left those of us in the business who were dedicated to helping develop new forms of performance wringing our hands and reassessing our guidelines. My firm belief was that only by linking artists in some kind of collaboration of minds again—sharing as many ideas, attitudes, beliefs and concepts as possible, could we have a meaningful creative resurgence. That called for education, an on-the-job learning process; and what better teachers could there be than those veterans who had lived with the creative process so long it was part of them. We began refunding some of our “alumni”, changing emphasis from *who* was new to *what* was new, provocative and exciting, that might help the next generation evolve. Groups like Talking Band, Otrabanda, Mabou Mines, the Theater for the New City, and even Joseph Chaikin’s revitalized Winter Project, were again eligible for grants for special projects. There was a time when I thought there was nothing more pitiful than an aging avant-garde. But as I waxed older with it and watched those groups’ continued growth and freshness, I was certain they still had something worthwhile to contribute.

My own problem with aging was the realization that now I was often the oldest audience member at Off Off productions. Even though I still fully related to most of the work, I wondered aloud at lunch one afternoon at Sardi’s if one could become too old for this business. My companions were Martha Coigney and Lynn Gross of the International Theatre Institute of U.S., and it was just after the proprietor, Vincent Sardi, Jr., had stopped by our table and mentioned having recently sold off the last of his stable of polo ponies because he was no longer able to ride well. Lynn nodded silently over my problem, dragging on her cigarette. Martha, on the other hand, redoubtable as ever, straightened up, tucked in her chin and declared, “Sweetie, if you’re NOT the oldest one there at the kind of shows you’re supposed to see, then you’re in the wrong place! The important thing at this moment of current stasis in the theater, she went on, was for me to continue being there and being aware, echoing Matthew Maguire’s “You just never know.”

Although our emphasis was strongly on keeping the old guard going now, I still kept looking for new artists wherever possible. But it wasn’t easy; the very meagerness of developmental output was such that, from 1985 onward, *The Village Voice*’s cultural “Choices” page went weeks without recommending a single noteworthy new group or production, for example. Economic factors were involved, of course: it was increasingly harder to get funding, obtain affordable working space, and interest young people in doing theater for its own sake, rather than scurrying off to Hollywood for the fame or to Television for the money. So fewer directors were willing to take the risk of starting new companies. Except for Cucaracha Theater, we had not found a worthy new group to consider funding for several years.

I briefly toyed with resigning my post—which, as predetermined, would mean the end of the foundation—but found I was so intrinsically involved, body and soul, by this time, that it was unthinkable; what had begun twenty-five years earlier as a grieving commitment to fulfill a lost friend’s final wish had blossomed into a joyous addiction. I was as hooked as those kids in the dead men’s overcoats selling tickets at Cucaracha, or old Walter the Vaudevillian’s elephant pooper-scooper.

Clearing away accumulated cobwebs and repositioning invisible antennas, it wasn’t long before I picked up signals regarding an impressive-looking little troupe of performers debuting in Soho that was ripe for plucking. Its uncapitalized moniker, *tiny mythic*, won me over right away, even if it hadn’t been lifted from some obscure Shakespearian text, as I suspected. (It was the only phrase a bunch of impecunious former Harvard drama seniors could summon to characterize the theater company they dreamed of establishing after graduation—of legendary proportions from infinitesimal resources.) Suddenly I was back in business. I had a *purpose*. Even if this group turned out to be another dud (it didn’t!), just the fact that others of my ilk thought well enough of it to contact me, was reassuring. A ticket was reserved for that night’s performance at

the ubiquitous Ohio Theater.

I felt the old surge of adrenalin as I prepared to go, wondering also what new “street sees” might be in the offing en route. With the vigor of a vampire on the scent of fresh blood, I donned usual garb—the jeans changed over the years, but, mercifully, their size didn’t—and was ready to resume a place in the scheme of things. Any place, I thought, grabbing a cap. Right up there behind the elephants in the Big Parade would be fine.

AFTERWORD

During the period between the end of the book and publication;

- Congress continually slashed the National Endowment for the Arts budget, reducing it by 40 percent in 1995; a survey of the country's regional non-profit theaters in 1994 showed all of them in financial straits.
- Cucaracha Theatre lost its lower West Side warehouse, went into temporary limbo, then found permanent quarters so far on the other side of town, English was the second language on the street.
- American Place Theatre stayed put near Times Square, but with dwindling resources and audiences, resorted to mostly one and two character plays staged minimally by Wynn Handman, and coproductions with other groups.
- Circle Repertory Company moved from its Seventh Avenue garage to larger digs—and headaches—on Bleecker Street; Austin Pendelton replaced Tanya Berezin, who retired.
- LaMama E.T.C. almost folded in 1993, but, as in the past, the redoubtable Queen Mother of Downtown, Ellen Stewart, and a canny staff successfully mounted a few emergency fundraising events to save the day, but the going remained precarious.
- Joseph Papp, Off Broadway's great impresario, died of cancer in 1991 only months after his son Tony died of AIDS; other AIDS casualties were George Ashley, Frank Maya, Maurice McClelland, Anthony Perkins, Huck Snyder and David Warrilow. We also lost Jessica Tandy, Ida Lupino, Colleen Dewhurst, Ed Emshwiller, Leonard Bernstein, Martha Graham, Federico Fellini, Eva LeGallienne, Howard Otway (who built Theater 80 St. Marks), and from the original cast of JUNEBUG GRADUATES TONIGHT!, Moses Gunn and Rosalind Cash.
- JoAnne Akalaitis succeeded Joe Papp at the Public Theater, only to be fired within a year; André Bishop left Playwrights Horizons to co-direct the Lincoln Center Theater, but not before seeing William Finn's musical FALSETTOS (a compilation of two "Marvin" one-acts) open on Broadway in 1992 to great reviews, a healthy run, and two Tony Awards for Best Book and Best Score; Philip Glass and Robert Wilson reunited to create an opera about explorer Vasco da Gama titled "White Raven" in 1992; John Jesurun produced three important new works, one of which, POINT OF DEBARKATION (1993), eerily incorporated large puppets that threatened to replace actors; John Kelly performed two new works, for one of which, LIGHT SHALL LIFT THEM (1993), he was taking trapeze lessons at last writing, the better to portray the real-life American expatriate cross-dressing aerialist Barquette who captivated Paris and Cocteau in the 1920s; Joseph Chaikin returned to full-time directing with the help of an assistant "interpreter."
- Czechoslovakia divided its name and country in two, and playwright Václav Havel was made leader of the new Czech Republic. (The other was called Slovakia.)
- Dustin Hoffman and his family visited Nantucket Island in late summer, 1995, on a rented yacht so big it had to anchor outside the harbor; its launch docked regularly just a few yards from the wharf gallery Arthur Schaefer and I still maintained.
- Tiny Mythic Theatre Company lived up to expectations and, with HOME for Contemporary Theater and Art, established HERE, a multimedia center on lower Sixth Avenue where, on November 3, 1995, Mabou Mines celebrated its 25th anniversary by presenting an experimental "twenty-first century rehearsal" (with the help of the Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre) of AN EPIDOG by Mines founder Lee Breuer, now teaching in California. Veteran Mines actors Ruth Malaczek, Fred Neumann and Terry O'Reilly, along with student dancers manipulating puppets by designer Julie Archer, performed before an audience in New York while, through a digital data line connected to a computer system and dis-

played on large projection screens (engineered by AT&T wizards), Breuer could simultaneously direct them and interact and rehearse the music, composer and dancers in Tokyo, Japan, as well as others in Santa Cruz and Los Angeles, California, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The session proved, among other things, that costs of physical productions could be greatly reduced by rehearsing participants wherever they were in the world at the moment, saving time, energy and living costs in the age of shrinking arts funding. Such an artistic and technological breakthrough meant artists could reimagine their art in new terms—with at least one foundation director ready and eager to help them do it.

D. R.

New York City, July 1996

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful for invaluable help with research, personal anecdotes, and large and small details of life and times in Off and Off Off Broadway from 1965 through 1990 from the following individuals:

Dante Albertie, Jon Aron, George Ashley, Roger Babb, George Bartenieff, Tanya Berezin, Robert Bethea, Rocky Bornstein, Casey Childs, Marilyn Chris, Ruth Cohen, Martha Coigney, Karen Cooper, Meghan Dean, Mindi Dickstein, Abba Elethea, Crystal Field, Dan Froot, Lynn Gross, Wynn Handman, John Jesurun, Robert Kalfin, John Kelly, Susan Latham, Leslie Linsley, Matthew Maguire, Maurice McClelland, Susan Moskowsky, Stephen Nisbet, Rob McBrien, Robert Ossorio, Janet Paparazzo, Randy Rollison, Arthur Schaefer, Ellen Stewart, Bette Stoler, Sara Torney, Wendy Wasdahl, Mac Wellman, and Susan Yankowitz.

Added thanks for the time and generosity of the staffs at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, New York City; and the Monroe County May Hill Russell Public Library, Key West, Florida.

REFERENCE SOURCES

Curtain Times: The New York Theater 1965-1987, Otis L. Gurnsey, Jr.;
Applause Theater Books 1987
The Obie Winners, Ross Wetzteon, Doubleday & Company 1980
The Circle Repertory Company: The First Fifteen Years, Mary S. Rysuk,
Iowa State University Press/Ames 1989
Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theater, Stuart A. Little
Theater in America, Mary C. Henderson, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1986
New Broadways, Gerald M. Berkowitz, Rowman & Littlefield
Joseph Chaikin, Eileen Blumenthal, Cambridge University Press, 1984
Cavett, Dick Cavett & Christopher Porterfield; Harcourt, Brace, Janovich
Contemporary Dramatists, edited by K. A. Berney; St. James Press
(5th Ed.)

Index

- A FABLE TELLING OF A JOURNEY, 205
A LETTER FOR QUEEN VICTORIA, 233
A WAY WITH WORDS, 301, 303
Aaron, Joyce, 59, 200-201
Abel, Lionel
 ABSALOM, 38
Abraham, F. Murray, 127
Acting Company, 315
Actors Equity, 6, 9, 64, 114-115, 122, 141-142, 194, 301
Actors Playhouse, 22, 138
Actors Studio, 47, 245
Adamson, Eve, 193, 255, 313
Adler, Stella, 187, 260, 265
Agee, James, 48
Ahearne, Tom, 54
Akalaitis, JoAnne, 13, 235, 237, 239-240, 243, 337
Albee, Edward
 A DELICATE BALANCE, 40
 BOX MAO BOX, 171
 MALCOLM, 33
 ROOM SERVICE, 171
 THE ZOO STORY, 40, 44, 171
 TINY ALICE, 30
 WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?, 30
Albee, Gloria
 THE YELLOW WALLPAPER, 98
Aldredge, Tom
 STOCK UP ON PEPPER CAUSE TURKEY'S GOING
 TO WAR, 120-121
Alexander, Cris, 44, 120
Alexander, Ross, 108, 114-115
Alfred, William
 HOGAN'S GOAT, 54
Ali, Rashied, 186
All About Eve, 19
Allard, Lynn, 223
Allen, Jessie, 245
Allen, Michael, 42, 213
Allen, Seth, 115, 117, 121, 171
ALLEY CAT, 230
Alwyn Nicolais Dance Company, 26
AMERICA HURRAH, 44, 115, 120, 198-199, 229
AMERICA KICKS UP ITS HEELS, 179
American Contemporary Theatre, 324, 326
American Film Institute, 26, 87
AMERICAN MYSTERIES, 189
American Place Theatre, 46, 48, 51-53, 57-60, 62, 83, 205,
 337
American Repertory Theatre, 34
American Shakespeare Festival, 34, 94
American Theatre Lab, 287
Anderson Theater, 230, 290
Anderson, Robert
 TEA AND SYMPATHY, 83
Anderson, Robyn, 229
Andrews, Raymond, 231
Anton, Robert, 205, 247-250, 258, 261, 264-266, 286
Antonelli, Steven, 274
APA-Phoenix, 30, 34
Arden, John
 LIVE LIKE PIGS, 44
 SERJEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE, 44
Argento, Dominick
 POSTCARD FROM MOROCCO, 98
Arkin, Alan, 317
Arnault, Andrew, 185
Arrabal, Fernando
 THE ARCHITECT AND THE EMPEROR OF ASSYR-
 IA, 312
Art Students League, 26-28
Artaud, Antonin, 39, 334
Arthur, Beatrice, 31
Artists Space, 267
Ashley, George, 232, 311, 337, 339
Ashley, Robert, 205
Astaire, Fred, 10, 249
AT THE CHELSEA, 302
August, Strindberg,
 GHOST SONATA, 143
Avis, Louis, 212
Awards, Bessie, 292
B. BEAVER ANIMATION, 237, 239, 242
B. Johnson, Lyndon, 18, 29
Babb, Roger, 14, 104, 217, 220-222, 224, 227, 247, 339
BABEL IN BABYLON, 189
BACA Downtown, 13, 16
Bacall, Lauren, 33
Bagden, Ron, 17
Baines, Lisa, 315
Bakos, John, 117
Bancroft, Anne, 57, 94, 142
Barbosa, James, 200, 202
Barnes, Theo
 PRAEXIS, 167
BARONG DISPLAY, 221
Barr, Richard, 33, 115, 174
Barrault, Jean-Louis, 232
Barry, Raymond, 200, 202, 216
Bartenieff, George, 98, 115, 166, 168, 170, 240, 339
Bassae, Anthony, 298

Baxter, Anne, 19
 Beal, John, 299
 Bean, Orson, 42, 133
 Beatles, 278
 Beck, Julian, 39, 198
 Becker, Honey, 192-193
 Beckett, Samuel
 CASCANDO, 239
 COME AND GO, 238
 COMPANY, 176, 241
 ENDGAME, 241
 HAPPY DAYS, 44, 237
 IMAGINATION DEAD IMAGINE, 241
 KRAPP'S LAST TAPE, 44, 171, 217
 MERCIER AND CAMIER, 97
 PLAY, 43, 116-118, 141, 189, 198, 237-238
 THE LOST ONES, 238
 WAITING FOR GODOT, 209, 237-238
 Belford Russell, Paul, 228
 Belgrave, Cynthia, 68, 72
 Bentley, Eric, 126
 Ben-Yakov, Jenn, 200
 BERENICE, 189
 Berezin, Tanya, 136, 140-141, 143-144, 146, 148-149, 151, 337, 339
 Bergen, Candice, 261
 Berger, John, 184-185, 216-217
 Berghof, Herbert, 198
 Bernard, Kenneth, 171, 321
 Bernstein, Leonard
 CANDIDE, 81
 Beruh, Joseph, 42
 Bethea, Robert, 248, 267, 339
 BETTY BENDS THE BLUES, 216
 Beverly Hills Hotel, 249
 Bimbo, 216
 BIRD'S EYE VIEW, 273
 Bishop, Andre, 175, 181
 BLACK MARIA, 281
 Black-Eyed Susan, 12, 278
 Blessing, Lee
 A WALK IN THE WOODS, 93
 Blitzstein, Mark
 REGINA, 98
 Block, Jerry
 FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, 30, 250
 Block, Lawrence, 59
 Blu, 184
 Bogardus, Stephen, 178-180
 Bogart, Anne, 216
 Bondi, Tom, 300
 BORN WITH THE MOON IN CANCER, 304-305, 307
 Bornstein, Rocky, 224-227, 339
 Bosch, Hieronymous, 32, 329
 Boulanger, Nadia, 236, 242
 Bouwerie Lane Theater, 193
 Bovasso, Julie
 ANGELO'S WEDDING, 125
 GLORIA AND ESPERANZA, 123-124
 BOWER BOYS, 16-17
 BOYS IN THE BAND, 24
 Bradbury, Ray
 THE WORLD OF RAY BRADBURY, 44
 BRAIN CAFE, 225-226
 Brakhage, Stan, 88, 156, 159
 Branca, Glenn, 186
 Brando, Marlon, 137, 198, 261
 Bread and Puppet Theater, 212
 Brecht, Bertolt
 CLOWN PLAY, 198
 MAN IS MAN, 197
 THE MEASURES TAKEN, 212
 Brecht, Mary, 101, 208
 Breuer, Lee, 10, 12, 232, 236, 238, 240, 242-243, 334, 337
 BRIDE AND HER EXTRA-RAPID EXPOSURE, 188
 Brook, Peter
 THE MAHABHARATA, 311
 Brooklyn Academy of Music, 81, 138, 311
 Brooks, Mel, 142
 Brown, Diane, 217-218
 Brown, Steve, 82
 Brown, Trisha, 205
 Bruce, Lenny, 41
 Brulin, Tone, 217, 220, 225
 Brustein, Robert, 241
 Buchner, George
 WOYZECK, 94
 Buckley, Tim, 225
 Bullins, Ed
 THE ELECTRONIC NIGGER, 59
 THE PIG PEN, 60
 BURNING HEART, 223
 Buscemi, Steve, 276, 278
 Busch, Charles
 VAMPIRE LESBIANS OF SODOM, 34
 Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, 197, 229, 231, 237, 255
 BYRDWOMAN, 230, 235
 C. Woolard, David, 180
 C.I.R.C.L.E., 142-143, 146, 154
 CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI, 189
 Cacoyannis, Michael
 TROJAN WOMEN, 44, 126, 166
 CACTUS FLOWER, 33
 Café Manzini, 41

Caffé Cino, 40, 59, 112, 120, 123, 134, 138-140, 143, 212
 Cage, John, 205
 Cahill, James, 127
 Calderon
 LIFE IS A DREAM, 194
 Caliban, Richard, 5, 8
 Callas, Maria, 60, 101, 168, 286, 288-289
 Camillo, Marvin Felix "Pancho", 256
 Camp, Nelson, 217
 Campbell, Joseph, 200
 Cantor, Arthur, 44
 Carlson, Ann
 ANIMALS, 321
 EMBEDDED, 303
 Carmines, Al
 CHRISTMAS RAPPINGS, 42
 Carradine, David, 32
 Cash, Rosalind, 76
 Cathedral of St. John the Divine, 325
 Cather, Willa, 142
 Cavett, Dick, 249, 271, 340
 CELL PIECE, 184
 Chaikin, Joseph, 127, 187, 197-198, 202, 205-206, 208, 211,
 217, 260, 329, 335, 337, 340
 Chaikin, Shami, 127, 200-204
 Chandler, Jeff, 255
 Chanel, Gabrielle, 18
 CHANG IN A VOID MOON, 272-273, 280, 290
 Channing, Carol, 133
 Chapin, Schuyler, 261, 265
 Charles, Valerie, 276, 280
 Charleson, Ian, 23
 Chase, Anthony, 292, 295, 305
 Chekhov, Anton
 ON THE HARMFULNESS OF TOBACCO, 94
 THE CHERRY ORCHARD, 126
 THREE SISTERS, 134-135, 143
 Chelsea Hotel, 301, 312, 321
 Chelsea Theater Center, 42, 44, 70, 81-82, 240
 Chepulis, Kyle, 13
 Cherry Lane Theatre, 87
 Cheverie, Hollis, 133
 Cheyefsky, Paddy, 91
 Childress, Alice, 91
 Childs, Lucinda, 205, 231, 234
 CHILE CHILE, 212
 Chilton, Nola, 198, 209
 Chong, Ping, 332
 CHORUS LINE, 43
 Chris, Marilyn, 68, 70, 72, 75-76, 78, 115, 339
 Christmas, David, 40
 Church of the Holy Apostles, 42, 64
 Churchill, Caryl, 266
 Cino, Joe, 40, 103, 108, 120, 132, 138, 140
 Circle Repertory Company, 13, 134-135, 143, 147, 337, 340
 Circle-In-The-Square, 34-38, 134, 318
 Civic Repertory Theatre, 34
 Clark Center for the Performing Arts, 174
 Clarke, Martha, 329, 333
 Cockettes
 PEARLS OVER SHANGHAI, 290
 Coco, James, 24
 Coe, John, 68, 70, 76, 78, 81
 Coigney, Martha, 50, 104, 256, 260, 335, 339
 Colette, 239-240, 261
 Collison, Michele, 204
 Connell, Jane, 31
 Connors, Richard, 280
 Conroy, Frances, 127, 154
 Conway, Kevin, 146
 Cooper Union School of Design, 84
 Cooper, Karen, 156-163, 339
 Cooper, Patricia, 202
 Copland, Aaron, 112, 235
 Cornell, Joseph, 187
 CRAZY PLAYS, 16
 Creation Production Company, 186, 188
 Crouse, Lindsay, 151, 154
 Cubiculo Theatre, 320
 Cucaracha Theater, 4, 121, 335
 CULTIVATING PARADISE, 185-186
 Cummings, Gretel, 115
 Cuneen, Peter, 185
 Cunliffe, Jerry, 117
 Czitron, Ralph, 131
 Dabney, Sheila, 216
 Dalrymple, Jean, 133
 DAMES AT SEA, 40
 Dance Theater Workshop, 15, 296, 300, 322
 Daniels, Jeff, 147, 149
 Danspace, 273, 332
 David, Michael, 81
 Dawkins, David, 217-218, 221
 de Camp, Kyle, 299
 de Ghelderode, Michel
 CHRISTOPHE COLOMBE, 194
 de Groat, Andy, 229
 De Niro, Robert, 261
 de Vincennes, Château, 261
 DEAD END KIDS, 239-240
 DEAFMAN GLANCE, 231
 Dear, Nick
 THE ART OF SUCCESS, 320
 Deena Burton, 101

DEEP SLEEP, 277-280
 Densmore, John, 253
 Devensky, David
 Beethoven's Chicken, 155
 Old Time Comedy Night, 155
 Devine, George, 47
 Dewhurst, Colleen, 35, 65-66, 337
 DIARY OF A SOMNAMBULIST, 293
 Diener, Joan, 31
 Dietrich Grabbe, Christian
 JEST, SATIRE, IRONY AND DEEPER SIGNIFI-
 CANCE, 313
 Diller, Elizabeth, 191
 Dixon, Brenda, 200
 Dobi, Steve, 157
 Dodger Theater, 82
 DOG'S EYE VIEW, 101, 273-274, 277
 Dorfman, David, 333
 Downtown Cinematheque, 88
 Drama Desk Award, 146, 211
 Dramatists Guild, 91, 181
 DRESSED LIKE AN EGG, 239
 Drexler, Rosalyn
 HOME MOVIES, 42, 121
 TRANSIENTS WELCOME, 170-171
 Driving Miss Daisy, 19
 Duberstein, Helen
 TIME SHADOWS, 143
 DUDE, 255
 Dudek, Tina
 THE ROOM, 109-110, 302
 Dugdale, John, 289, 295
 Dukakis, Olympia, 60
 Dunaway, Faye, 54
 Duncan, Sandy, 60, 329
 Dunn, Douglas, 205, 243
 Dunn, Joseph, 323
 Dunnock, Mildred, 65
 Durang, Christopher
 THE ACTOR'S NIGHTMARE, 175, 182
 Durning, Charles, 143
 Dylan, Bob, 274
 Eaton, Bruce
 A.NON, 323-324
 Eichelberger, Ethyl, 267
 EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH, 97, 101, 234-235, 311
 El Teatro Campesino, 256
 ELEGIES FOR ANGELS, PUNKS, AND RAGING
 QUEENS, 23
 Emmons, Beverly, 208, 216
 Emshwiller, Ed
 Thanatopsis, 26
 En Garde Arts
 ANOTHER PERSON IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY, 301
 AT THE CHELSEA, 302
 BAD PENNY, 13, 301
 CROWBAR, 301
 TERMINAL BAR, 301
 THE RITUAL PROJECT, 301
 Encompass Theatre, 98
 Eno, Brian, 186
 Ensemble, Berliner, 237, 243
 ENTERTAINING MR. SLOANE, 33
 Epstein, Alvin, 94
 Evanitsky, Stephanie, 328-329
 EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE, 14-15
 Eyen, Tom, 40, 115-116, 123-124, 126, 132, 212
 Faber, Ron, 200
 Fajans, Michael, 225
 FALSETTOLAND, 180
 FALSETTOS, 98, 178-180, 337
 Family, 18, 149, 256
 Farber, Rod
 PROSPERAL RISING, 167
 Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, 158
 Feinstein, Peter, 154, 156-157
 Feldman, Peter, 198
 Fellini, Federico
 Amarcord, 253
 Fellini Satyricon, 252-253
 Fellini's Roma, 253
 Juliet of the Spirits, 252
 La Dolce Vita, 252
 La Strada, 252
 Nights of Cabiria, 252
 The Clowns, 253
 Variety Lights, 252
 Fenley, Molissa, 186, 223
 Fennel, Nick, 225
 Fergusson, Honora, 241
 Ferrell, Conchatta
 DANNY, 143
 Festival d' Automne, 232, 261
 Field, Crystal, 98, 166, 168, 170-171, 339
 Film Archives, 88, 154, 167
 FIND MY WAY HOME, 299-300
 Fingerhut, Arden, 216
 Finguerra, James, 101
 Finn, William, 98, 176-177, 337
 Five Blind Boys of Alabama, 242
 Fleming, John, 225, 227
 Flowers, Roma, 296
 Fonda, Henry, 33
 FORCES OF DESTINY, 291

Ford Foundation, 52, 159-163
 Foreman, Richard
 BLVD. DE PARIS, 167
 DR. SELAVY'S MAGIC THEATRE, 167
 DREAM TANTRAS OF WESTERN MASSACHU-
 SETTS, 167
 EVIDENCE:, 167
 HOTEL FOR CRIMINALS, 167
 THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION, 167
 Foss, Lucas
 INTRODUCTIONS AND GOODBYES, 98
 Fosse, Bob, 32
 Foster, Paul
 BALLS, 110
 ELIZABETH I, 255
 THE MADONNA IN THE ORCHARD, 113
 TOM PAINE, 116-118, 120, 126
 Foy, Peter, 329
 Francekevitch, Al, 133
 Franklin, Aretha, 278
 Fraser, Alison, 177, 179
 Freedman, Gerald, 120
 Freeman, Morgan, 242
 Frey, Leonard, 24
 Frisch, Max
 BIOGRAPHY: A GAME, 82
 Froot, Dan
 AND ANOTHER, 330, 333
 RONALD REAGAN, 333
 THE JAZZ SECTION, 332-333
 Gabor, Nancy, 210
 Gallo, Rickie, 232
 Garcia Lorca, Federico, 94
 GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS, 329
 Gardenia, Vincent, 60
 Gardner, Fred
 CO-OP, 168
 Garson, Barbara
 CO-OP, 168
 DINOSAUR DOOR, 171
 Gay, John
 POLLY, 81
 THE BEGGAR'S OPERA, 81
 Geiser, Janice, 216
 Gelber, Jack
 THE CONNECTION, 39
 GENERATION, 33
 Genet, Jean
 THE MAIDS, 35, 125, 237
 THE SCREENS, 81, 125, 242
 Gentry, Minnie, 68
 Gerard, Danny, 180
 Gesner, Clark
 YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN, 85, 155
 GIACONDA & SI-YA-U, 216
 Gibson, William
 THE MIRACLE WORKER, 94
 Gilbert and George, 128
 Gilbert, Ronnie, 199, 208
 GILGAMESH, 183, 186
 Gilroy, Frank
 THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES, 30
 Ginsberg, Allen, 19, 81
 Giscard d'Estaing, Valery, 261
 Glass, Philip, 221-222, 245
 Glass, Philip, 97, 101, 186, 205, 234-238, 240, 242, 337
 Glen, Scott, 40
 GO WEST JUNGER MANN, 291-292, 295
 Goldberg, Richard, 298
 Golden, John, 91
 Goldfarb, Sidney
 TRISTAN & ISOLT, 216
 Goldman, James, 32
 Goldsmith, Oliver
 SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER, 195
 Goodhart, William, 33
 Goodman, Paul
 JONAH, 54
 Gordon Matta Clark, 237
 Gordon, David, 42, 205
 GOSPEL AT COLONUS, 242
 Goyen, William, 47-48
 Grady Russell, Paul, 323
 Graham, Martha, 212, 223, 337
 Grant, Cary, 86-88, 160
 Grant, Lee, 12, 22
 Graves, Nancy, 237
 GREEN EYES ARE FINE, 227
 Green, Joanna, 177
 Greenspan, David, 17, 19
 2 SAMUEL 11, ETC., 17
 Greer, Will, 65
 Gregory, Andre
 Philadelphia Theatre of the Living Arts, 170
 Grizzard, George, 143
 Grooms, Red, 158
 Gross, Lynn, 335, 339
 Gross, Mandy, 333
 Grotowski, Jerzy, 39, 195, 198, 217
 Group Theater, 260
 Guare, John
 HOME FRIES, 171
 HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES, 93
 Guggenheim Fellowship, 168, 202

Gunn, Bill
 JOHANNES, 66
 Gunn, Moses, 68-69, 75-76, 337
 Gurney, Jr., A. R.
 THE DINING ROOM, 175, 182
 Guttenplan, Howard, 88-90
 Guy, Michel, 232, 261
 Hagan, John, 278
 Hagen, Nina, 184, 288
 Haimsohn, George, 40
 HAIR, 43, 120-121, 126, 312
 Halley, Oliver, 40
 Hamburger, Anne, 13, 189
 HAMLET, 10, 23, 149-151, 219, 320
 HAMLET, THE ANTIMUSICAL, 10
 Hamner, Richard, 257, 264
 Hancock, Sheila, 33
 Handke, Peter
 KASPAR, 81
 Handman, Wynn, 42, 47, 50, 53-57, 59-62, 65, 116, 210, 337, 339
 HAPPY ENDING and DAY OF ABSENCE, 43
 Hardware Poets Theater, 42
 Harmonic Choir
 Outside of Being There, 325
 Harnick, Sheldon
 FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, 30, 250
 FRUSTRATION, 98, 143
 Harris, Cynthia, 200-201
 Harris, Jim, 184
 Harris, Philip, 200
 Harris, Rosemary, 32
 Hartinian, Linda
 FLOW MY TEARS, 241
 THE POLICEMAN SAID, 241
 Havel, Václav
 A PRIVATE VIEW, 12, 22
 MEMORANDUM, 21, 170
 THE INCREASED DIFFICULTY OF CONCENTRATION, 21
 Hawkins, Trish, 144-145, 147
 Hawkinson, Laurie, 191
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 50, 60, 216
 Hayn, Sybille, 212, 214
 Haynes, Jayne, 200
 Hays, David, 93, 95
 Hecht, Ben
 A FLAG IS BORN, 198
 Heide, Robert
 TROPICAL FEVER IN KEY WEST, 171
 Hellman, Lillian
 MONTSERRAT, 171
 THE LITTLE FOXES, 98
 Helms, Jesse, 18
 HELP WANTED, 241
 Henderson, Hamish, 117
 Hendrix, Jimi, 274
 Hepburn, Katharine, 18, 158, 309, 319
 Herman, Jerry
 HELLO, DOLLY!, 250, 266
 MAME, 31, 43, 57
 Hertzberg, Alan, 133, 143
 Herzog, Werner, 158
 Hicks, Laura, 315
 Hirsch, Joseph, 27
 Hirsch, Judd, 144-145, 147, 171
 Hodges, Patricia, 315
 Hoffman, Dustin, 57-58, 125, 134, 317-318, 337
 Hoffman, Joanna, 184
 Hoffman, William
 AS IS, 23, 141, 267
 SPRING PLAY, 141
 Hoge, John, 5, 8
 Holcomb, Rubin, 186
 HOLDING PATTERNS, 215
 Holtzman, Willy, 16
 HOME for Contemporary Theater and Art, 337
 Hood, Janet, 23
 Horby, Lee, 141
 Horne, Katharyn, 85
 Horowitz, Israel, 91, 126
 Horowitz, Susan, 221
 Horvitz, Wayne, 186
 HOT LUNCH APOSTLES, 216, 226
 Hunter, Kim, 65
 Hurlin, Dan
 SMALL, 245
 THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME, 244
 THE JAZZ SECTION, 332-333
 Hurt, William
 CHILDE BYRON, 154
 HURLYBURLY, 154
 Hykes, David, 325
 I. Gurdjieff, G., 182
 Ibsen, Henrik
 Brand, 49
 LITTLE EYOLF, 138
 ILLUSTRATED JOURNAL, 182
 IN THE CAGE, 184, 186
 IN TROUSERS, 177-179
 INADMISSIBLE EVIDENCE, 32
 Independent Theatre Company, 313
 Inge, William, 91
 Innaurato, Albert

GEMINI, 175-176
 UHRLIGHT, 175
 Institute of Contemporary Art, 18, 280
 International Theatre Institute of U.S., 50, 335
 Ionesco, Eugene, 334
 Iowa Theater Lab, 256
 Irene Fornes, Maria, 42, 91, 171
 Irving, Jules, 141
 J. Moore, Edward
 THE SEA HORSE, 146
 Jackson, Anne, 317
 James, Henry, 184
 Janowich, Ron, 182
 Jarry, Alfred
 KING UBU, 41
 Jean Cocteau Repertory, 195, 255, 311, 313
 Jean Cocteau Theater, 193-194
 Jeffer, Robinson
 MEDEA, 44, 126, 138
 Jenkin, Len
 AMERICAN NOTES, 316
 DARK RIDE, 316
 FIVE OF US, 316
 GOGOL, 316
 LIMBO TALES, 314, 316
 MY UNCLE SAM, 316
 JESSE JAMES, 193, 255, 265
 Jesurun, John, 14-15, 101, 129, 247-248, 267, 269, 271-272,
 275, 279-280, 282-283, 286, 290, 303-304, 315, 337,
 339
 Joffrey Ballet, 329
 John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, 87
 John F. Kennedy, 29, 41, 87, 135
 John Houseman Theatre, 314
 John V. Lindsay, 29, 113
 Johnson, Mimi, 205
 Johnson, Tom
 FOUR NOTE OPERA, 98
 Johnston, Philip, 186
 Jones, Brian, 274-275
 Jones, LeRoi
 SLAVESHIP, 81
 Jonis, Joanne, 221
 JOURNEY OF THE FIFTH HORSE, 56-58
 Judson Poets Theater, 212
 JUICE, 14, 227, 307
 Juilliard, 151, 258, 261,
 Julian, Don, 108
 JUNEBUG GRADUATES TONIGHT, 68, 70, 80, 204, 337
 KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia (sic) TERRACE,
 231
 KAAKA-MAKAAKOO, 218
 KALEVALA, 213-214, 217
 Kalfin, Robert, 42, 44, 64, 81, 339
 Kaminsky, Marc, 214
 Kass, Jerome, 44
 Kass, Peter, 198, 212
 Katz, Leon
 DRACULA: SABAT, 167
 Katz, Ronald, 102
 Kazan, Elia, 30, 137, 168
 Keach, Stacy
 JESSE JAMES, 193, 255, 265
 Keefe, Barrie
 GIMME SHELTER, 82
 Keitel, Harvey, 40
 Kellogg, Marjorie, 216
 Kelly, John, 128, 184, 247-248, 267-268, 272, 283-285, 288,
 291, 294-295, 298-301, 305, 307, 321, 337, 339
 Kennedy, Adrienne
 RAT'S MASS, 132
 Kerr, Berilla
 THE ELEPHANT IN THE HOUSE, 143
 Kessler, Bruce, 108
 King, Keith
 KING OF SPAIN, 230
 SECOND SPECIES, 98-100, 102
 Kinney, John, 82
 Kitchen, 14, 47, 225, 267-268, 282
 Knight, Shirley, 65
 Knott, Frederick, 32
 Knowlton, Kim, 15
 Koljonen, Irja
 A.NON, 323-324
 Kornfeld, Lawrence, 42, 114, 166
 Kramer, Larry
 THE NORMAL HEART, 23
 KRAPP'S LAST TAPE, 44, 171, 217
 Kreshna, Ruth, 208
 Krieger, Robby, 253
 Kuchar brothers, George and Mike, 159
 L. B. (Burt) Dallas, 243
 L. Mee, Charles, Jr, 42
 La MaMa E.T.C. Annex 14, 98
 Café La MaMa, 41, 44, 109, 112, 118
 GPA Nucleus, 126
 Great Jones Repertory, 128
 Great Jones Repertory Company, 128
 La MaMa Ensemble, 114
 La MaMa Plexus, 114, 126
 La MaMa Troupe, 114, 121-123
 Latin bilingual troupe, 126
 Lang, Jack, 261
 Langella, Frank, 51-52, 62

Lanier, Sidney, 42, 46, 48, 53, 58, 65, 213

Lansbury, Angela, 31

Lansbury, Edgar, 42, 60, 133

Lapine, James

TABLE SETTINGS, 175

LaPlante, Skip

SECOND SPECIES, 98-100, 102

Latouche, John, 82

Leach, Wilford, 126

Lear, 10-12, 98, 124, 209

Lebensohn, Jeremy, 216, 262

Lee Browne, Roscoe, 51-52, 65-66

Lee Sherman, Margo, 212, 215

Lee, Ralph, 200

LeGallienne, Eva, 34, 337

Lennon, John

Sean, 133, 198

Leokum, Arkady

FRIENDS and ENEMIES, 44

Leon, Joseph, 318-319

Lerner, Harry, 142, 154, 163

Levy, Jacques, 59, 199

Libin, Paul, 35, 115

LIES AND SECRETS, 209, 223

LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSEPH STALIN, 230-232

LIFE AND TIMES OF SIGMUND FREUD, 231

Lights, Fred, 108

LiHard, Tom, 202

Lillie, Bea, 182, 286

Limbo, 268, 292-294

Lincoln Center Theater, 19, 30, 337

Lindsay, Chris, 333

Lindsay, Howard, 91

Linney, Romulus, 14, 154, 171

LION IN WINTER, 32

Lipari, Victor, 115, 117

Lisz, Gary, 301

Little, Susan, 209

Living Theater, 39, 120, 197-198, 204, 229, 321

Locacsio, Michael

A CORNER OF THE MORNING, 109

Lombard, Michael, 59

Long, Darby, 249-250

Long, David, 66, 69, 78, 80-81

Loquasto, Santo, 64, 127, 179

Loudon, Dorothy, 309-310

LOUISIANA LEGONG, 221

LOVE OF A POET, 305-306

Lowell, Robert, 50-52, 54, 60

Lucas, Craig

BLUE WINDOW, 147

PRELUDE TO A KISS, 13

Ludlam, Charles

BIG HOTEL, 168

BLUEBEARD, 168

CAMILLE, 80, 168

CONQUEST OF THE UNIVERSE, 168

CORN, 168

DER RING GOTT FARBLONJET, 168

EUNUCHS OF THE FORBIDDEN CITY, 167

GALAS, 168

GRAND TAROT, 168

SECRET LIVES OF THE SEXISTS, 168

TURDS IN HELL, 168, 321

WHEN QUEENS COLLIDE, 168

WHORES OF BABYLON, 168

LUDLOW FAIR, 44, 143

Lupino, Ida, 27, 337

Lupone, Patti, 179

Lyman, Dorothy, 200

Lynne, James Broom

THE TRIGON, 44

M. Jones, Jeffrey, 16

MacDermot, Galt

HAIR, 43, 120-121, 126, 312

Madden, Donald, 60

Maddow, Ellen

BEDROOM SUITE, 215

MADNESS OF LADY BRIGHT, 44, 115, 120, 140-141

Maeda, Jun, 14, 126-127, 215-216, 225, 227

Maguire, Matthew, 127, 186-188, 190-191, 335, 339

Maile, Ayaz, 185-186

Malaczek, Ruth

WRONG GUYS, 241

MALCOLM, 33

Mamet, David

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, 274

MAN OF LA MANCHA, 31, 43

Manhattan Festival Ballet, 85-86

Manhattan Theatre Club

THE ART OF SUCCESS, 320

Mankiewicz, Joseph, 19

Mann, Emily

EXECUTION OF JUSTICE, 93

Mann, Harry, 206-207, 209, 216

Mann, Stanley, 44

Mann, Ted, 35

Manzarek, Ray, 253

Mapplethorpe, Robert, 18, 20

MARAT/SADE, 32, 329

MARCH OF THE FALSETTOS, 178-180

Margulies, David, 310, 318-320

Margulies, Donald

SIGHT UNSEEN, 93

Masini, Giulietta, 252
 Masteroff, Joe (CABARET), 93
 Maya, Frank, 303, 337
 MAYBE IT'S COLD OUTSIDE, 292
 Maynard, John, 221
 McBrien, Rob, 182-183, 185, 339
 McCauley, Robbie, 209
 McClelland, Maurice, 255-256, 258, 260-261, 264, 337, 339
 McElduff, Ellen, 12, 239, 241, 243, 245
 Meade, Margaret, 24
 Meara, Anne, 101, 309
 Medicine Show, 202, 211-212
 Medoff, Mark
 WHEN YOU COMIN' BACK, RED RYDER?, 146
 Mehrten, Greg
 IT'S A MAN'S WORLD, 241
 Mekas, Jonas, 88, 167
 Melfi, Leonard, 42, 50, 111, 114-116, 121, 126, 131
 Mellor, Stephen, 13
 Melville, Herman, 50
 MEMORIES OF THE SALTIMBANQUES, 184
 MEMORY THEATRE OF GIULIO CAMILLO, 189-190
 Menard, Marleen, 295, 297, 299-300
 Menotti, Gian-Carlo
 A HAND OF BRIDGE, 98
 INTRODUCTIONS AND GOODBYES, 98
 Meredith Monk, 187, 212, 230, 276, 304
 Merrill, Gary, 19
 Metropolitan Opera House, 97, 234, 311
 Middleton, Ray, 31
 Midler, Bette
 MISS NEFERTITI REGRETS, 124
 Miglietta, John, 184
 Milbauer/Becker, 10
 Milch, Mildred, 42, 129, 133
 Miles, Sylvia, 320
 Millennium Film Workshop, 88
 Miller, Arthur
 A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE, 30
 INCIDENT AT VICHY, 30
 Miller, Florence
 KEEPERS OF HIPPO HORN, 167
 Miller, Fritzie, 133
 Miller, Sandy, 154
 Milner, Ronald
 WHO'S GOT HIS OWN, 59
 Mines, Mabou, 10-12, 97, 102, 126, 167, 197, 205, 216, 235-245, 332, 335, 337
 MINIMUM DAILY REQUIREMENT, 185
 Mitchell, Joni, 290, 295, 303
 Mitterrand, Francois, 261
 MIX, 226
 Moliere
 THE DOCTOR IN SPITE OF HIMSELF, 221
 Monick, Eugene, 50
 Montague, Lee, 33
 Moore, Anthony, 184
 Moore, Cynthia, 217, 221
 Moore, Jim, 118
 Morel, Paul, 114
 Moriarty, Michael, 260
 Morris, Robert
 Waterman Switch, 42
 Morrison, Jim
 The Doors, 253
 Morrow, Charles
 THE LIGHT OPERA, 98
 Mosakowski, Susan, 186-187, 339
 Mosher, Gregory, 19
 Moss, Robert, 173, 182, 195, 197
 Mudd Club, 290
 Multigravitational Experiment Group
 AERODANCE, 328
 Muni, Paul, 198
 Murrin, Tom, 131
 Music-Theatre Performing Group/Lenox Arts Center, 98, 167
 MUTATION SHOW, 202-203
 MUTATIONS, 202-203
 Nash, Jeff, 280
 Nathanson, Roy, 333
 National Council of the Arts, 18
 National Endowment for the Arts, 18, 29, 81, 87-88, 120, 157, 182, 235, 246, 337
 National Foundation of the Arts and Humanities, 18
 National Repertory Theatre, 34
 National Theater of the Deaf, 93, 95
 Neighborhood Playhouse, 34, 47
 Nelson, Chris, 40
 Nelson, Claris
 MEDEA, 44, 126, 138
 Neruda, Pablo, 217
 Neumann, Frederick, 239, 241, 243
 New Dramatists, 91-93, 202
 New York City Opera, 142, 235-236
 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, 30-31
 New York Shakespeare Festival, 13, 19, 85, 151, 329
 New York State Council on the Arts, 88, 90, 157, 168, 235, 246
 Nichols, Mike, 45, 57, 153, 317
 Nichols, Robert, 166
 NIGHTWALK, 202-203
 Nims, Letha, 91
 NINE, 252, 266

NO PLAYS NO POETRY, 216
 Noble, Adrian, 321
 Nowara, Andreas, 186
 NUMBER MINUS ONE, PART ONE, 274
 Nunziata, Tony, 183-184
 Obie, 5, 7, 12-13, 16, 21, 38-39, 57, 75, 82, 116-117, 121, 125, 144-146, 149, 169, 171, 197, 202-203, 211-212, 215, 243-244, 280, 292, 298, 311-312, 316, 329, 340
 O'Casey, Sean
 BEDTIME STORY, 198
 O'Connor, Kevin, 115, 117-118, 124
 ODE TO A CUBE, 304
 O'Hara, Michael, 91
 Ohio Theater, 216, 336
 O'Horgan, Tom, 98, 114-118, 120-121, 126, 138, 141
 OLD GLORY, 50-54, 60
 Onassis, Dagmar, 285-286, 288, 291
 O'Neill, Eugene
 BOUND EAST FOR CARDIFF, 34
 THE HAIRY APE, 34
 Memorial Theater Foundation, 94
 Ono, Yoko, 133
 Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, 167
 Open Theater, 50, 197-205, 211-212, 216-217, 223, 329
 ORANGE GROVE, 226
 Ordway, Sally, 40
 O'Reilly, Terry, 12, 239, 241, 243, 245, 337
 Orenstein, Gloria
 Theater of the Marvelous, 247, 255
 Orton, Joe, 33
 Ossorio, Robert, 85, 339
 Otrabanda, 14-15, 104-105, 216-227, 335
 Otway, Howard, 85, 337
 Overmyer, Eric
 HAWKER, 316
 IN PERPETUITY THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSE, 316
 KAFKA'S RADIO, 316
 MI VIDA LOCA, 316
 ON THE VERGE, 283, 314-316
 Owens, Rochelle
 FUTZ, 117, 126
 HOMO and THE QUEEN OF GREECE, 123
 P.S., 13-14, 144, 226-227, 267, 285, 291, 332-333
 Pace, Jennifer, 300
 Pacino, Al, 40
 Page, Geraldine
 Sanctuary Theatre, 317-318, 320
 Palmore, Julia, 184
 Palumbo, George, 191
 Paparazzi, Janet, 5
 Papp, Joseph, 13, 19, 35, 43, 75, 127, 168, 205, 239, 301, 318, 329, 337
 Parichy, Dennis, 138, 140
 Parks, Suzan-Lori
 PARSIFAL, 234
 Parsons, Estelle, 34
 Pashalinski, Lola, 11-12, 167, 171
 PASS THE BLUTWURST, BITTE, 292, 294-298, 304
 Patrick, Robert
 KENNEDY'S CHILDREN, 113, 175
 Patton, Will, 208-209, 316-317
 Paul S. Daniels, 181
 Paul, Graham, 217
 Paula Cooper Gallery, 237
 Peaslee, Richard, 97, 329
 PEDRO PARAMO, 215-216
 Penny Arcade, 302
 Performing Artservices, 205, 232, 257, 265, 311, 326
 Performing Garage, 168, 184, 187, 237, 268, 274
 Perkins, Anthony, 73, 78, 337
 Peters, Bernadette, 40
 Petit, Lenard, 225
 Petito, Anthony, 318
 Phase 2, 41
 PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME, 32
 Picasso, Pablo, 184
 Pilobolus Dance Theatre, 329
 Piñero, Miguel
 A MIDNIGHT SPOON AT THE GREASY SPOON, 171
 SHORT EYES, 256
 Pinter, Harold
 THE CARETAKER, 195
 THE ROOM, 109-110, 302
 Pirandello, 334
 Playhouse of the Ridiculous, 131
 Playwrights Horizons, 98, 173-176, 178-182, 195, 316, 337
 Porter, Beth, 117
 Posin, Kathryn, 329
 Pratt Institute, 27, 161, 229, 238, 270
 PRELUDE TO DEATH IN VENICE, 240-242
 Premice, Josephine, 65
 Pressman, Elizabeth, 300
 Pressner, Stan, 301
 Preston, Robert, 32
 Price, Leontyne, 133, 142
 Primary Stages, 16-17
 Prince, Faith, 180
 Prince, Harold, 31, 78, 82
 Project, Winter, 205, 207-209, 211-212, 217, 223, 225, 335
 PROPAGANDA, 189
 Public Theater, 13, 21-23, 43, 85, 97, 120, 124, 167, 170, 180, 202, 204-205, 207, 237, 239, 242-243, 316, 337

Pulitzer Prize, 40, 44, 50, 147, 171, 181
 Pyramid Club, 267, 280, 290, 292, 297
 QUASI-KINETICS, 226
 Quintero, Jose, 35, 38
 Rabb, Ellis, 173
 Radio City Music Hall, 16, 32
 RADIO PLAY, 189
 Rafalowicz, Mira, 208
 Ragni, Gerome, 120
 Rambaldi, Laura, 117
 Ramblin', Lute, 12
 Ransom, Tanya, 288, 290
 RAPP Art Center, 23
 Rasdon, James, 120
 Raymond, Bill
 COLD HARBOR, 241
 Re.Cher.Chez, 243-246
 re:room, 224-225
 RE-ARRANGEMENTS, 207-208
 RED HORSE ANIMATION, 237
 RED HOUSE, 274-275
 Redford, Robert, 159-162
 Reed, Lou, 278
 Reeve, Christopher, 19, 147, 149
 Reeves, John, 10
 Reichblum, Bill, 195
 Reisner, Steven, 208
 Remick, Lee, 32
 RETURN OF SECOND CITY, 44
 Rhodes, Nancy
 Encompass Theatre, 98
 Ribman, Ronald
 CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE, 60
 HARRY, NOON, AND NIGHT, 52, 55-56
 Ricci, Vito, 186-187, 190
 Rice, Tim, 121
 Richards, Lloyd, 59, 301
 Richardson, Ian, 32
 RIDE ACROSS LAKE CONSTANCE, 189
 Ridiculous Theatrical Company, 12, 35, 167-168
 Rieff, David, 260-261
 Rims, Ruby, 288
 RIVER RAFT REVUE, 220-221
 Robards, Jason, 35, 38
 Robbins, Jerome, 78, 112, 230, 232
 Robbins, Tim, 171
 Robbins, Tom, 315
 Roberts, Louise, 174
 Roberts, Tony, 147
 Rockefeller Foundation, 12, 62, 122
 RODENTS AND RADIOS, 5, 7-10
 Rodgers, Mary, 45
 Rohn, Jennifer, 227
 Rolling Stones, 274
 Rosario
 Rose, Iris, 15
 Rosenberg, Stanley, 114
 Roth, Beatrice
 AUDIO PORTRAITS, 245
 SEVENTEEN, 245, 333
 STUDYING CAROL LOMBARD, 245
 Rounseville, Robert, 31
 ROYAL HUNT FOR THE SUN, 32, 43
 Royal Shakespeare Company
 MARAT/SADE, 32, 329
 Ruddy, Jeanne, 223
 Rupert, Michael, 178-180
 Russell, Bill, 23, 166
 Russell, Mark, 285, 291
 Russell, Rosalind, 31, 36
 Sadler, Bill, 316
 Sainer, Arthur
 CELEBRATION, 168
 THE DAY SPEAKS BUT CANNOT WEEP, 120
 SAINT AND THE FOOTBALL PLAYERS, 238
 Sainte-Marie, Buffy, 278
 SALT SPEAK, 223
 San Francisco Mime Troupe, 237
 Sands, Diana, 143
 Sardi, Vincent, Jr, 335
 SAVAGE/LOVE, 207
 Schaefer, Arthur, 24, 36, 251, 337, 339
 Schennkan, Robert
 THE KENTUCKY CYCLE, 93
 Schickel, Richard, 57
 Schiele, Egon, 295-296
 Schindler, Ellen, 200
 Schisgal, Murray
 JIMMY SHINE, 317
 LUV, 317
 THE FLATULIST, 314, 317-320
 THE LOVE SONG OF BARNEY KEMINSKI, 317
 THE TYPISTS and THE TIGER, 317
 WALTER, 317-318
 Schmidman, JoAnn, 202
 Schofield, Liz, 16
 School of Hard Knocks
 Yoshiko Chuma, 332
 Schroeter, Werner, 158
 Schwartz, Stephen
 GODSPELL, 255
 Scifidio, Ricardo, 191
 Sequoio, Ron, 85-86
 Serban, Andrei

- AGAMEMNON, 126
 ARDEN OF FAVERSHAM, 126
 AS YOU LIKE IT, 127
 FRAGMENTS OF A TRILOGY, 126
 GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN, 126
 THE CHERRY ORCHARD, 126
 UBU PERE, 126
 UMBRELLAS OF CHERBOURG, 127
 UNCLE VANYA, 38, 73, 127
 SERPENT, 200-202
 Serrano, Andres, 18
 Setrakian, Edward, 114
 SEVEN DEADLY ELEMENTS, 186-187
 SHAGGY DOG ANIMATION, 237
 Shakespeare, 10, 12-13, 19, 23, 34-35, 43-44, 75, 84-85, 94,
 127, 137, 145, 151, 174, 198, 219, 311, 313, 329
 Shapiro, Leonardo
 Shaliko troupe, 205
 Shared Forms, 182-188, 191, 227, 251, 288
 SHATTERHAND MASSACREE-RIDERLESS HORSE, 275,
 277
 Shaw, George Bernard
 ARMS AND THE MAN, 138
 Sheen, Martin, 39
 Shepard, Sam
 ACTION, 60
 BACK BOG BEAST BAIT, 60
 COWBOY MOUTH, 60, 206
 KILLER'S HEAD, 60
 LA TURISTA, 59, 116
 SEDUCED, 60
 THE ROCK GARDEN, 44
 UNSEEN HAND, 132
 Shepard, Tina
 HOME REMEDIES, 215
 Shepp, Archie, 65, 67, 70, 72, 76
 Sheridan
 SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL, 195
 Sherwood, Lloyd, 28
 Shultz, Mary, 16-18, 225-226, 333
 Shunney, Andrew, 64
 Silverman, Stanley, 167
 Simon, Carly, 142
 Simon, Joanna, 142
 Simon, Neil
 BAREFOOT IN THE PARK, 30, 161-162
 THE ODD COUPLE, 30
 Simonds, Clodegh, 186
 SISTER SUZIE CINEMA, 242
 Sklar, Roberta, 202
 Smith, Craig, 195
 Smith, Ebbe Roe, 316
 Smith, Jack, 132, 156, 169, 229
 Smith, Patti, 60, 206
 Snyder, Huck
 CIRCUS, 292
 Snyder, Kip Yin
 Sobechanskaya, Ekatherina, 298
 SOFT TARGETS, 216
 Sondheim, Stephen, 53, 82, 176, 181
 Sonnier, Kenneth, 237
 Sontag, Susan, 132, 200, 260-261
 Sophocles
 ANTIGONE, 223, 242
 OEDIPUS AT COLONUS, 242
 OEDIPUS REX, 73, 242
 Space for Innovative Development, 203, 328
 Spicehandler, Steve, 185
 Squat Theatre
 ANDY WARHOL'S LAST, 311
 MR. DEAD AND MR. FREE, 312
 PIG, CHILD, FIRE!, 311-312
 St. Clement's Church, 46
 St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery, 167, 171, 213, 273, 275, 332
 St. Peter's Church, 42, 65
 St. Vincent Millay, Edna
 ARIA DA CAPO, 198
 Staler, Bette, 251
 Stanislavsky, Konstantin, 217, 260
 Stanley, Charles, 212, 214
 Starkweather, David
 A PRACTICAL RITUAL TO EXORCISE FRUSTRATION AFTER, 143
 FIVE DAYS OF RAIN, 143
 Steele, Richard
 DENIM AND ROSE, 143
 HOWIE, 143
 Stein, Gertrude
 IN CIRCLES, 42
 Stein, Joseph
 FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, 30, 250
 Stella, Frank, 20
 Stem, Stephen, 217
 Sternburg, Janet, 185-186
 Stevens, George, 87
 Stewart, Ellen, 40, 44, 89-90, 102-103, 105, 108, 111, 113, 115-
 116, 118, 121, 124, 127-128, 131-133, 140-141, 168, 186,
 205, 217, 223, 227, 229, 237, 240, 247, 255, 266, 273, 313,
 337, 339
 Stieglitz, Alfred, 47
 Stiller, Jerry
 SNEAK PREVIEWS, 101
 Stilt, Milan, 149
 Stoler, Shirley, 40

Story, Guy, 292, 295
 Straight, Beatrice, 147, 151
 Strimling, Arthur, 212, 215
 Strouse, Charles
 SATISFACTION, 98
 STUMP REMOVAL, 220
 Sturges, Elizabeth, 146, 150
 Suber, Byron, 301
 Sullivan, Brad, 68
 SUMMER AND SMOKE, 22, 34-35, 80, 141, 318
 Sumner, Nancy, 184
 Sundance Film Festival, 162
 SUNSPOT, 282
 Sutherland, Joan, 96, 98
 Sutton, Dudley, 33
 Swados, Elizabeth, 98, 126-127, 213, 255, 260
 SWEET CHARITY, 31
 T.W.E.E.D., 291
 Takahiko Iimura, 88
 Take, 2, 41, 83, 210
 Talking Band, 14, 204-205, 211-217, 225-226, 335
 Tally, Ted
 HOOTERS, 175
 Tandy, Jessica, 19, 337
 Tatro, Richard, 49
 Tavel, Ronald
 GORILLA QUEEN, 42
 MY FETUS LIVES ON AMBOY STREET, 171
 Taylor, Benjamin, 251
 Taylor, Bill, 184
 Taymor, Julie, 216
 Tebalak, John-Michael
 ELIZABETH I, 255
 GODSPELL, 255
 Telson, Bob, 242
 ten Cate, Ritsaert
 Mickery Theatre, 261, 280
 TERMINAL HIP, 13
 Terry, Megan
 EAT AT JOE'S, 197
 KEEP TIGHTLY CLOSED IN A COOL DRY PLACE, 199
 WET ROCK, 198-199
 Tesich, Steve
 BABA GOYA, 60
 NOURISH THE BEAST, 60, 152
 THE CARPENTERS, 60
 Testa, Mary, 177
 Tharp, Twyla, 187, 212, 329
 Theater for the New City, 14, 98, 166-168, 171-172, 187, 213, 215, 223, 237, 240-241, 335
 Theater Genesis, 42, 44, 213-214
 Theater of the Eye, 123
 Theatre de Lys
 Lucille Lortel, 22, 180
 Thibeuau, Jack, 238
 Thirkield, Rob, 117, 134, 136, 138, 140-144, 146-147
 Thomas, Richard, 147
 Thompson, Ernest
 WEST SIDE WALTZ, 309, 319
 Thompson, Evelyn, 72
 THREE LIVES OF LUCIE CABRAL, 216
 THREE POETS, 14, 171
 THREEPENNY OPERA, 38
 Tierney, Gene
 Blue, 225, 300
 Tighe, Larry, 276, 280
 Tighe, Michael, 276, 278-280
 Tiny Mythic Theatre Company, 337
 tiny mythic, 335
 Tipton, Jennifer, 127
 Toby, Cliff, 114
 Tolan, Michael, 47, 49, 56, 58
 Tomlin, Lily, 11, 133
 TONGUES, 205-208
 Tony Award, 5, 124
 Torm-Tohá, Fernando, 302, 303
 Torn, Rip, 56, 318
 Tornay, Sara, 86
 TOURISTS AND REFUGEES, 208-209
 TRANS-SIBERIAN EXPRESS, 299
 TRESPASSING, 140, 209, 223
 Trimble, Vivian, 297, 301
 Trinity Repertory Company, 216
 Trinket Monsod, 185
 Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet, 298
 Troy, Louise, 318
 Tune, Tommy
 BAKER STREET, 266
 BEST LITTLE WHOREHOUSE IN TEXAS, 266
 CLOUD 9, 266
 GRAND HOTEL, 266
 HELLO, DOLLY!, 250, 266
 IRMA LA DOUCE, 266
 SEESAW, 266
 THE WILL ROGERS STORY, 266
 Turgenev, Ivan, 56
 Turman, Glynn, 68
 Turner Ward, Douglas, 43
 Turner, Janetta, 185
 Ullmann, Liv, 318
 UNTITLED (THE DARK AGES FLAT OUT), 187
 Uttley, William, 209

Vaccaro, John
 COCK STRONG, 131-132
 EYE ON NEW YORK (FOUR COMPOSERS), 132
 LA FIN DU CIRQUE, 132

Vail, Apple
 STARCOCK, 241

Valdez, Luis, 256

VAMPIRE LESBIANS OF SODOM, 34

van Itallie, Jean-Claude
 AMERICA HURRAH, 44, 115, 120, 198-199, 229
 STRUCK DUMB, 210-211
 THE SERPENT, 200-202
 THE TRAVELER, 210

Van Tieghem, David, 302

Vann, Barbara, 200

Verdon, Gwen, 32

Vernon Rice Award, 52, 202, 211

VIA, 128, 216

Village Voice, 7, 38-39, 54, 76, 88-90, 112, 114-115, 121, 149, 157, 168, 230, 241, 248, 269, 274, 280, 286, 305, 311, 323, 335

Vinaver, Steve
 THE MAD SHOW, 45

Vivian Beaumont Theater, 126

Voskovec, George, 38

W. Mason, Marshall, 125, 134, 136, 143

Wagner, Jane, 133

Wagner, Richard, 334

Wagner, Sanghi, 276

WAIT UNTIL DARK, 32

Waite, Ralph, 54

Walken, Christopher, 32, 143

Wallach, Eli, 317

Walter, S. S., 114

Walther, Trine, 297

Wanshel, Jeff
 ISADORA DUNCAN SLEEPS WITH THE RUSSIAN NAVY, 62

WAR IN HEAVEN, 209-210

Warhol, Andy, 42, 88, 133, 156, 158, 302, 312

Warren Powell, Michael, 117

Warren, David, 180

Warrilow, David, 237-238, 240, 337

Wasdahl, Wendy, 182, 184-186, 251, 339

Washington Square Players, 34

Wasserstein, Wendy
 MONTPELIER PA-ZAZZ, 175

Wastell, Stephen, 302

Watchface, 15

Waterston, Sam, 59

Weaver, Fritz, 147

Webber, Andrew Lloyd

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR, 121

Webster, Margaret, 34

Wedekind, Frank
 LULU, 146-147, 242

Weidman, Charles, 287

Weill, Kurt, 38

Weiss, Jeff, 40, 121

Weiss, Jules, 125

Weiss, Peter, 32, 112

Wellman, Mac
 BAD PENNY, 13, 301
 CELLOPHANE, 13
 TERMINAL HIP, 13

Wenders, Wim, 158

Westergaard, Peter
 MR. & MRS. DISCOBBOLOS, 98

Wetherall, Jack, 216

Wheeler, Hugh, 81

WHITE WATER, 280-282

WHITE, 15-16, 116, 123, 189, 280-282

White, John, 44

White, Ruth, 34, 44, 199

WHITE/BLACK, 189

Whitehead, Paxton, 40

Whitehead, Robert, 30, 133, 168

Wilbur, Richard, 81

Williams, Amlin
 ZONEW OF THE SPIRIT, 171

Williams, Tennessee
 BATTLE OF ANGELS, 137, 146-147, 149
 IN THE BAR OF A TOKYO HOTEL, 195
 KIRCHE, KUCHE, UND KINDER, 195
 ONE ARM, 109
 SOMETHING CLOUDY, SOMETHING CLEAR, 195
 SUMMER AND SMOKE, 22, 34-35, 80, 141, 318

Wilson, Angus
 FENCES, 93

Wilson, Lanford
 ANGELS FALL, 147
 BALM IN GILEAD, 140, 143, 147
 BURN THIS, 147
 FIFTH OF JULY, 136, 147
 GINGHAM DOG, 143
 HOME FREE, 115, 140-141
 HOT L BALTIMORE, 144-145, 147, 149
 LEMON SKY, 143, 147
 NO TRESPASSING, 140
 RIMERS OF ELDRIDGE, 140
 SERENADING LOUIS, 143
 SO LONG AT THE FAIR, 140
 TALLEY AND SON, 147, 149
 TALLEY'S FOLLY, 147, 149

THE MADNESS OF LADY BRIGHT, 44, 115, 120, 140-141
 THE MOUND BUILDERS, 147
 THE SANDCASTLE, 140-141
 UNTITLED PLAY, 117, 141
 Wilson, Robert, 97, 101, 187, 197, 229, 233-236, 245, 247-248, 255, 264, 274, 311, 324, 337
 Winde, Beatrice, 68, 72
 Windust, Penelope, 255
 Winters, Shelley, 261
 WONDERFUL TOWN, 36
 Wong, Joni, 185
 Wood, Margaret, 205
 Woodruff, Robert, 208
 Wooster Group, 281
 WORKSONG, 213-216
 Worley, Lee, 200-201
 Worsley, Dale
 THE KEEPER series, 245
 Worth, Irene, 30, 127, 152
 Wright, Garland, 315-316
 Xavier Kroetz, Franz
 THROUGH THE LEAVES, 241
 Yaffe, James
 THE DEADLY GAME, 44
 Yale Drama School, 59, 65, 83, 108
 Yankowitz, Susan
 TERMINAL, 13, 202, 301
 Yockel, Jane, 204, 207, 326
 Yorck, Ruth
 LOVE SONG FOR MRS. BOAS, 120
 Youmans, James, 180
 Young, Barbara, 115
 Young, Collier, 27
 Zank, Rick, 256
 Zien, Chip, 177-181
 Zimet, Paul
 DAILY DRILL, 215
 Zimmerman, Elyn, 191
 Zwick, Joel, 126
 IMPERCEPTIBLE MUTABILITIES IN THE THIRD KINGDOM, 13